Spring 2019

Under Skies Less Serene: An Ecocritical Approach to the British Romantic Pastoral

Marissa Kopp
Elizabethtown College, Koppm@etown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://jayscholar.etown.edu/englstu

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://jayscholar.etown.edu/englstu/4

This Student Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the English at JayScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English: Student Scholarship & Creative Works by an authorized administrator of JayScholar. For more information, please contact kralls@etown.edu.
Under Skies Less Serene: 

An Ecocritical Approach to the British Romantic Pastoral

By Marissa Kopp

Elizabethtown College Press
Elizabethtown
And so it goes for all ecocriticism: as the ice disappears, as
the drought lengthens, as the flood crests, does the article on
Shakespeare-inspired weed species matter a whit more than
the article on food imagery in *Troilus and Cressida*?

—William Major and Andrew McMurray, 3
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The banks of the lazy River Derwent in Cromford, England, appear an unlikely cradle for an Industrial Revolution. Yet it was here in 1771 that Sir Richard Arkwright (1732–1792) opened the first water-powered cotton mill, relying on the waters’ current to spin fine yarn at unprecedented rates (European Route). Buoyed by this success, Arkwright used the following decade to construct a factory empire no longer tethered to rivers; as the strength of water replaced the strength of man, so too would steam-powered engines replace water-powered mills (Miller and Glithero 98). The art of cotton spinning, a practice once confined to the pace of a skilled farm-wife’s hand, became the function of a machine. This mechanical equation increased output; and the proportional increase of materials and labor demanded that lands produce more cotton, skies swallow more smoke, and workers bear a new burden.

The opening of Cromford Mill, called the “birthplace of the modern factory system” (European Route) and the herald of “the beginning of the ‘Factory Age’ in Britain” (“British History”), symbolized the ushering
in of Britain’s industrial era. While one year alone fails to encompass the entirety of this era’s origins, the early 1770s represent a symbolic initiation into an age of unprecedented environmental and worker exploitation. Seventy-five years after Arkwright’s first mill, social philosophers would write essays on the devastating effects of British factory work. One such example, The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845), by Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), illustrates the haunting legacy of these cotton mills. Engels wrote about “Women made unfit for childbearing, children deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted with disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie” (1249). This somber conclusion traces its origins back to the modern factory ideology first presented in 1771.

This is not to imply that England did not experience the effects of production before the early 1770s, nor that this production did not appear in British literature. For example, Alexander Pope (1688–1744) alludes to the mass production of cast-steel scissors in “The Rape of the Lock” (1712), capturing the fascination that “the glitt’ring Forfex” (l. 115 and l. 148) invoked. Thus, the model of industrialization existed before the first modern factory system appeared in England; moreover, this style of production shows earlier influence on British literature and poetry. However, the phenomenon of a classical Capitalist economic system—one which values perpetual growth—was a phenomenon which came to full fruition in the early 1770s (Caradonna 46). As such, historians often cite 1770 as the time in which “critics began to appear who realized that a deregulated, growth-oriented economy brought potentially negative consequences for society, the economy, and the environment” (ibid).

Though this date represents an initiation into Britain’s next socio-economic era, the literary backlash to this industrialization, later called the British Romantic era, lacks such a fixed date. Some sources avoid exact dates altogether, attributing the British Romantic period to a vague span between “the last years of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th” (Baker et al.). Other scholars consider the start of the British Romantic period to be 1798, coinciding with the publication of Lyrical Ballads by William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) (Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 60). Still, more cite
the inception of the French Revolution as the beginning of the era (ibid). Yet considering 1789 to be the start of the British Romantic era leaves a two-decade margin between Britain’s “Factory Age” and its Romantic age. This margin, from approximately 1770–1789, is often encompassed by the British “Pre-Romantic” era (Brown 29; Simpson 1; Tolley 12). However, this thesis will consider the British Romantic period as ranging from 1770–1835, for the following reasons.

The storming of the Bastille in 1789 would make an effective spark for a literary age drawn to resistance; however, the thrill of dissent ran through the English colonies decades before France’s bloody revolution. In 1764 and 1765, respectively, British Parliament passed the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act, arousing agitation in the American colonies (Allison 8). By November of 1768, British troops occupied Boston to counter the dissent; and, within two years, this occupation erupted with the Boston Massacre (ibid). Finally, an exchange of gunfire at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts marked the “official” beginning of the American Revolution in April of 1775. This upheaval of revolution could not be contained across the Atlantic. By June of 1780, the prolonged war, coupled with the desire for more religious freedom, erupted in violent riots across London (“William Blake”). It was at the sight of these rioters burning Newgate prison that an early Romantic poet, William Blake (1757–1827), found “images of violent destruction and unbridled revolution” which would influence his works such as America (1793) and Europe (1794) [ibid].

The ensuing American victory in 1783 both required diplomatic aid from France and inspired French citizens to question their own monarchy. The necessity of the American Revolution as a precedent for the French Revolution is best described by a German diplomat, Friedrich von Gentz (1764–1832):

In the conduct and language of most of the founders of the French revolution, it was impossible not to perceive an endeavour to imitate the course, the plans, the measures, the forms, and, in part, the language of those, who had con-
ducted that of America; and to consider this, upon all occasions, as at once the model, and the justification of their own. [5]

Yet the French interpretation of resistance deviated from its American “model” (ibid). As Blake was disturbed by the London riots, the Reign of Terror (1791–1793) disenchanted another young Romantic poet who was once a supporter of the Republican cause in France: William Wordsworth (Forward).

Thus, while the start of the French Revolution may mark a clear delineation for the start of the British Romantic era, this event and its aftermath “only emphasized the already dominant ideology” (Simpson 3). To consider this the first date neglects the precedent of the previous two decades. Therefore, in using the less traditional timeframe of 1770–1835, this thesis gains a more accurate representation of social, environmental, and literary changes as they first commenced in the British Romantic period (Webster).

Of course, to define “British Romanticism” is a task more laborious than to define a date range of the period upon which scholars can agree. To use the term “Romantic” itself within the context of 1770–1835 borders on anachronistic. Writers of the time would not have self-identified as “Romantics”; rather, scholars and critics in the mid- to late 1800s retroactively applied the term (Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 60). Labels and categorizations of a Romantic “school of thought” began after the movement had passed, with such publications as “The Romantic School” (1835), by Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), or The History of English Literature (1863) by Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), and such categorizations continue to evolve in modern criticism (Perry 5; Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 60). The parameters and implications of each scholar’s use of the term “Romantic” are seldom consistent, and seem often modified to reflect the preference or focus of a specific study (Simpson 1).

Such ambiguity in definition may be well founded. The period between 1789 and 1824 saw the publication of “five thousand books of original verse”; by terms of sheer volume, then, to draw conclusions from
the most notable poets of the era fails to encompass such diversity (Curran, “Romantic” 216). Yet focusing on those influential literary figures also fails to find distinct trends. In terms of origins, Romantics came from a scattered range of socioeconomic classes: George Gordon Byron (1788–1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) were aristocrats; Wordsworth and Coleridge from the middling part of the middle-class; Blake and John Keats (1795–1821) from the upper working class; and John Clare (1793–1864) from the agricultural laboring class (Dawson 49). In terms of age, Romantic poets considered within this thesis fall within distinct generational gaps: Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774), William Cowper (1731–1800), and Blake were born before the late 1750s; Wordsworth and Coleridge were born in the early 1770s; and Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Clare were born around 1790 (Dawson 50). This generational gap found some Romantics on the cusp of maturity at the conception of the French Revolution; others only drew their first breath during the Reign of Terror. In an era so vastly influenced by the events and the aftermath of 1789, such interludes in generational outlook would alter political ideologies (Dawson 51), rendering even a composite character of a conventional “Romantic” insufficient (Brown 26).

Though acknowledging this variability concedes the impracticality, if not impossibility, of applying any broad generalizations to the meaning of “British Romanticism,” this analysis necessitates some unifying trends. Broadly speaking, while these writers may not have been unified by a single class, age, or school of thought, all seemed aware of the fact that they lived in an era of rapid transformation. Perhaps the greatest testament to this, and the greatest event of historical significance within the period, remains the French Revolution, which Shelley describes as “the master theme of the epoch in which we live” (qtd. in Dawson 49). Though generational gaps found the implications of the war touching the Romantics at different stages in life, all engaged in revolutionary debate (Duff 25). The physical conflict occurred across the English Channel, yet the political discourse swept over Britain, forcing the young and old to question fundamental principles of society: the nature of governing bodies, the concept of justice, and the definition of human rights (ibid). Not only the war itself, and its polarizing qualities, but also the lasting ideological
debates sharpened Romantic writers’ ability to engage in thoughtful discussion and imaginative expression rather than simply recycling answers from Classical models (Duff 31).

The ability of Romantics to redefine these philosophical theories, and to revise them when presented with a contrasting reality, reflected the shifting tides of cerebral growth and exploration. Though sometimes caricatured by critics as wistful idealists, more tethered to possibility than actuality, Wordsworth’s generation of poets—the “First Generation Romantics”—recognized that the heinous aftermath of the French Revolution deviated from its founding doctrine. Many early Romantics then rejected their revolutionary support in favor of an ideology outlined by Edmund Burke (1729–1797) in his book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) (Dawson 57). This continuous reexamination would mirror conventions of the entire era, an era in which writers strove to construct a fuller representation of the Ideal while acknowledging the necessity of Reason. Though Romanticism often seems pitted against the Enlightenment, or characterized as a rebellion against Reason, this discourse does not reject rationality but builds upon previous models of thought and refrines toward the Ideal, “gathers up and recollects, as it sweeps all with it toward the future” (Brown 47). In this sense, the French Revolution serves as an example of the tone of change by “elevat[ing] the political debate to the level of a debate of principle [. . . and . . .] call[ing] into question the values of reason, progress, and efficiency” (Dawson 57).

Perhaps even more significant than the Romantics’ ability to engage in higher-order debate was the dispersal of these ideas. Romantics first practiced the skills of engaged rumination, and the dissemination of their conclusions, through written media. Some writers chose ephemera to rapidly distribute political ideology to a broad audience (ibid). Others chose poetry as a form for wrestling with these reflections on revolution. Some poetry directly explored the events of the French Revolution, such as Coleridge’s “Ode on the Destruction of the Bastille” (1789), while others left the source of inspiration implicit though thematically present, such as *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) by Shelley (Dawson 49). In effect, some scholars argue that Romanticism sought “in poetry what revolution aspires to achieve in politics: innovation, transformation, defamiliarization” (Duff
While the success of such aspirations can be debated, few would dispute that these written media succeeded in another sense: British and European writers during the French Revolution exhibited the power of circulating ideas (ibid). In practice, it was through this exchange of knowledge and opinion that the general public could sway from the starving proletariat one day to orchestrators of a monarchical overthrow the next.

Yet Romantic writers could not scrutinize the French Revolution, nor wield a pen over public opinion, without turning the lens on their own society. As previously described, the war itself represented only one facet of a mounting transformation. Truthfully, the very notion of revolution “was many different things at different times, in different places, to different people. [. . .T]he course of political revolutions was and is often guided by revolutions in ideas, feelings, behavior, the Industrial Revolution, [. . .] revolutions in life style, even in poetic style” (Brown 45). Pairing this multifaceted expression of revolution with the Romantics’ heightened sensitivity to moral dilemmas highlighted failures within those British “ideas, feelings, [and] behaviors,” especially in regard to the Industrial Revolution (ibid). In this way, a new, or perhaps renewed, sense of injustice towards ill-treatment of the impoverished in Britain as a consequence of industrialization also came to light.

This sensitivity to the struggles of others, and a power to bring attention to those struggles, coincided with a time when Britain possessed much to overcome. As industrialization progressed from Arkwright’s first notion to a norm, the devastation of the poorest ranks of society often transpired without notice. However, Romantic writers demanded consideration of these unheard voices, from observations of agricultural and factory laborers to condemnation of the slave trade thriving across the British Empire. These new themes manifested themselves in Romantic poetry, and served as a reminder of the severe cost, “both to subordinate humans and to the earth,” of upholding the growing demands of an industrialized society (Rigby, “Ecocriticism” 151).

To demonstrate this growing theme, one of the earliest works considered in this thesis, “The Deserted Village” (1770) by Goldsmith, offers an illustrative example. The Enclosure Acts, which existed since 1604 but were enforced in earnest during the decades leading into and beyond the
Romantic period, served to reduce large plots of land in rural communities, or common areas (O’Donnell 1). The idea of “enclosing” land translated to a literal need to enclose within a walled or neatly hedged area any land claimed to be owned (ibid). While simple in theory, the consequences of this practice were complex. Unfortunately, most of the poorest laborers lacked the means to enclose their lands and, thus, lost farms worked for generations to richer prospectors. The enclosures abolished rights over common land (O’Donnell 11), which, by British Parliamentary estimates, affected some 6.8 million acres of land (“Managing”). Further, this practice converted diverse landscapes into segments of monocultures or pastures, capitalizing on the demands for particularly desired or expensive products, such as wool (O’Donnell 14). Goldsmith utilized pastoral poetry as his medium for highlighting the destructive practice of redefining land-management for the sole sake of increased agricultural productivity.

Goldsmith’s intentions with his work emphasize a theme which holds lasting significance. Despite the negative impacts of the Enclosure Acts, to this day the British Parliament website describes the practice as a “more economical way of farming”; and it claims, “There is little doubt that enclosure greatly improved the agricultural productivity of farms from the late 18th century by bringing more land into effective agricultural use” (ibid). The authors briefly tack a sentence to the end of their discussion which mentions a historical “divide” over the displacement of the “lowest ends of rural society” (ibid). This shows, both historically and contemporarily, that people and nature can be marginalized at the expense of what governing bodies define as “improvement” (O’Donnell 1).

This sustained marginalization emphasizes the need for a faction within a society to engage in thoughtful consideration of those entities which have been trivialized or silenced. In the Romantic period, poets assumed this responsibility. While the era found many considering the development of new technologies (such as these more “productive” and “economic” forms of agriculture, or the inception of the factory system) to be the advancement of science and the rational progression of humanity, Romantic authors were sensitive to the human and the environmental impact that these discoveries often neglected to consider. Romantic writers used the debate of “fundamental principles,” which began in the 1700s
with the American Revolution, to prompt conversations on the rights of
general humanity and advance into discussions on the rights of nonhu-
man entities. Thus, Romantic writers’ dissatisfaction with an increasingly
industrialized environment, often misconstrued as a mere product of aes-
thetic displeasure, was a product of the principles of justice and sensitiv-
ity which governed the entire age (Dawson 67).

In the abridged context of the previous pages, the transition from
the major historical events of the British Romantic period to the result-
ing literary themes reflects the relationship between Romanticism and an
altered environment. Though the origins and the intentions of Romantic
literature seem grounded in an ecological (and humanitarian) ideology,
contemporary critics have been more prone to cast judgment on the ex-
ecution (Pinkney 411). Some scholars caricature Romantic works as an
impractical devotion to escapism and to idealism, especially with regard
to pastoral trends in environmental writing (Rigby, “Ecocriticism” 155).
While increased information and experience should better inform and cri-
tique tropes of nature writing, a mounting trend considers all of Romantic
pastoralism—and, indeed, pastoralism in general—to be inconsequential
(Phillips 146) or, worse, to be detrimental to modern environmental aims
(Garrard, Ecocriticism 63). Ecocritical scholar, Astrid Bracke, describes
the movement best: “More recently,” she explains, “pastoral has become
something of an ecocritical black sheep, best avoided altogether” (434)

As critics begin to retroactively reconsider the British Romantic pe-
riod as a model for environmental theory, many question the extent to
which these works can act as a vehicle for modern ecological thought. Yet
this growing inclination to abandon the cultural and environmental legacy
of the Romantic pastoral is not “best avoided altogether”; in fact, this
trend demands discussion (Bracke 434). This thesis proposes that discus-
sion through an investigation of the polarizing direction of ecocriticism
as a literary movement and the pillars on which these arguments stand.

The first section of this thesis seeks to establish a context for mod-
ern ecocriticism. This chapter outlines the origins of this literary theory
and addresses competing definitions and agendas within the school of
thought. Major authors, works, and achievements within the discipline are
discussed. However, much as this thesis has not ventured to define British
Romanticism, this work does not seek to define ecocriticism; rather, the
aim is to better define the relationship between Romanticism and modern
ecological thought (Brown 25). This section hopes to develop contempo-
rary expectations, disputations, and limitations of ecocriticism before ret-
roactively applying this framework to British Romantic pastoralism. The
subsequent chapters consider selected critiques of the latter in terms of
which are the most well-defined (i.e., detail and length of texts devoted
to these critiques); the most prevalent (i.e., frequency of such critiques);
or both.

The next section introduces the first ecocritical critique of the Ro-
mantic pastoral: i.e., the pastoral is an outdated form for contemporary
ecological thought because the modern era lacks a distinction between
“urban” and “nature.” Some critics claim “nature writing’s pastoral im-
pulse [. . .] not only obscures the genre’s urban roots but also diverts
attention from the city as both a unique environment in its own right and
a powerful force affecting other environments” (Philippon 397). Others
view Romanticism as a “calling away” to a wilderness untouched by hu-
manity which, in the contemporary era, no longer exists (Bracke 435). To
address these claims, this chapter traces the “urban roots” of the pastoral
to its conception, and then tracks its legacy in the Romantic era and be-
yond (Philippon 397). Further, this section discusses the misconception
that a “calling back to nature” originates from a distinct divide between
human (or “urban”) and nature, and questions how the value of the pas-
toral changes even under the assumption that there once was, and now is
no longer, a wilderness separated from humanity’s touch.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the third chapter addresses
the most prevalent ecocritical critique of Romantic pastoralism: that the
pastoral is an “escapist fantasy” which lacks grounding in reality (qtd. in
Rigby, “Ecocriticism” 156). This sentiment arises in modern and historic
criticism, such as the criticism of Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), who be-
lieved that the pastoral was “easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting” (Ke-
mode 11) because pastoral poets “never drove a field, and that they had
no flocks to batten” (Heath-Stubbs 70). To address this argument, this
section considers a wide range of poetic examples which convey the influ-
ence of both real and destructive events. Further, this section refutes the
claim that Romantic pastoralism is an idealist “refuge from modernity” by showing that “modernity” is not directly synonymous with advancement (Philippon 397). In essence, this chapter strives to demonstrate that the Romantics’ return to pre-industrialized principles need not be considered an idealist or nostalgic regression; rather, Romantic writers re-evaluated earlier philosophies and believed that a restoration of these simpler ideologies could serve as human progress.

To conclude, this thesis aspires to better understand the ability of British Romantic pastoral poetry to not only withstand but also to inform a modern ecocritical review. This goal is achieved by analyzing the variable meaning of “ecocriticism” and by dissecting two major critiques of this literary theory in regard to the Romantic pastoral genre. As the changing landscape and changing interplay between nature and humanity established in the British Industrial period continue to spread, it is hoped that some conclusions drawn from predecessors who first witnessed the destructive power of industrialized tendencies can elucidate modern solutions.


Tolley, Michael J. “Preromanticism.” Wu, pp. 12–22.
Webster, Suzanne. Personal Interview. 30 May 2018.

Works Referenced

As the 1993 Western Literature Association (WLA) conference in Wichita, Kansas, came to a close, an older man sat in the last moments of a session titled “Ecocriticism: Reimagining the Way We Write about the West.” While his peers shuffled towards the doors, the man, visibly distraught, raised his voice against the bustle to ask, “But what is ecocriticism?” (Abdurrahmani 268).

When the 1994 WLA conference convened in Salt Lake City, Utah, sixteen position papers, entitled _Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice_, cited this inquiry in their Introduction: “Gathered here are one-page position papers by sixteen ‘younger’ scholars, all of whom are pondering the question posed by the good man in Wichita: ‘What is ecocriticism?’” (Branch & O’Grady, “Introduction” 1). Though scholars deliberating for a year’s time on a passing question appears a touching sentiment, the Introduction’s next sentence reinforces the confusion, and the frustration, which first formed the question. The compilers write: “Rather than provide the definitive answer, the point of these papers is to foster an

Chapter One

“But what is ecocriticism?”
awareness of the varied uses (or non-uses!) to which scholars are putting the term” (ibid). It seems the good man in Wichita would never receive a “definitive answer” (ibid).

In short, a notable air of hesitation clouds a simple definition of “ecocriticism.” As such, and as is noted in the Introduction of this current thesis, this work does not seek to define ecocriticism. While this chapter will overview several competing definitions of the theory, for the sake of practicality a general understanding of the term will be borrowed from The Ecocriticism Reader. In that collection of essays, one editor defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” comparing the field to activist methodologies like Marxist criticism (Glotfelty xviii). Yet Marxism has the benefit of one unifying manifesto: ecocriticism does not. Rather than attempt to create such a manifesto through the enormous task of crafting one unifying definition, the aim of this chapter instead is to better define the relationship between pastoralism, British Romanticism, and modern ecological thought.

In order to develop a context of contemporary expectations, disputations, and limitations of ecocriticism, the origin of the term and of the movement the term inspires must first be traced. The term “ecocriticism” stems from the 1978 publication, by William Rueckert (1926–2006), of the essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (Abdurrahmani 267). In this essay, Rueckert offers a broad delineation of a tentative school of thought; he calls his work an “experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (105). Modern ecocritics often cite Rueckert’s “experiment” as the first direct link of literature and ecological value (Branch & O’Grady, “Introduction”; Gladwin; Johnson 7). Rueckert argues, “Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination” (Rueckert 108). Rueckert believes this “stored energy” exists as a living idea within, or a revalued interpretation of, a particular literary work, the passions and convictions of the author trapped in the amber of the text (108). Shifting from a rhetorical focus, this energy materializes not from a particular intent or meaning; rather, the stored transformative power persists through the ability of a piece to remain alive in a culture or
language (Rueckert 109). Literary works which exist as living documents prompt “[r]eading, teaching, and critical discourse [which] all release the energy and power stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community” (ibid). As with all energy, this property is not fixed within a poem; rather, Rueckert argues, all literature with an environmental message retains the ability to be transferred into the general public in new forms, such as civil unrest or political action. In essence, Rueckert applies ecological terminology to the concept of a poem harnessing the potential energy to spark a revolution.

Yet to suggest Rueckert’s essay alone birthed the concept of ecocriticism would be wildly inaccurate. Six years prior, Joseph Meeker (1932–), in The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic (1972), penned the fledgling principles of “literary ecologies,” which Rueckert would recycle into his new term of “ecocriticism” (Gladwin). In this seminal text, Meeker offers a cohesive study of ecology and literature radically different to Rueckert’s focus. Meeker argued that comedic and tragic plays arise from innately ecological concepts (Rigby 155); in particular, he emphasized comedy as a means of survival (Johnson 9) and critiqued classical tragedy as a fortification of anthropocentric “assumptions that nature exists for the benefit of mankind” (Meeker, The Comedy 42). In a reply to a literary review of his book, Meeker clarified that fictional literature is not the cause of environmental crisis; instead, literature is “an expression of the values and beliefs” of an era and, as such, is “a part of the record of the mental flows that have guided humans in their misuse of the Earth” (Meeker, “The Comedy” 352). This eco-historic outlook has led many ecocritics to credit Meeker as the first to suggest a connective tissue between literary studies and ecological studies strong enough to warrant a united field of theory (Gladwin).

Still, Meeker himself rode on a wave of environmental activism characterizing the 1960s and 1970s. Within these decades emerged texts which some scholars consider the predecessors of ecocriticism, while others consider the texts a foundation (Johnson 9). It was in 1964, for example, that American professor and literary critic, Leo Marx (1919–), published The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. In his work, Marx traced pastoral idealism in American literature to the con-
sumerism plaguing his era in order to answer a pressing question: “What possible bearing can the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment have upon the lives men lead in an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society?” (11). In Marx’s critique, it is possible to see a complicated relationship between pastoralism and ecocriticism beginning in the formative years of the theory.

Further, Marx’s analysis of American literature paved the way for an equivalent analysis of British practices (Johnson 9). Marxist theorist and academic, Raymond Williams (1921–1988), wrote on the juxtaposition of Britain’s urbanized cities and its bucolic countryside in his 1973 book, The Country and the City (ibid). A similar connection between pastoralism and ecocriticism threads through Williams’ work, with his longest chapter devoted to “Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral” (13–34). However, Williams adds another crucial element to the tangled relationship of literary “-isms”: British Romanticism. In his work, Williams references Wordsworth more than nearly any other author (335), with a separate index entry for references to The Prelude (334). In addition, he invokes William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cowper, Oliver Goldsmith, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Robert Southey (1774–1843), among others. Though Williams concedes his limitation to “English writing” is mostly “[f]or practical reasons,” he suggests the period to be particularly suited for this form of analysis (2). He writes: “It ought in any case to be clear that the English experience is especially significant, in that one of the decisive transformations, in the relations between country and city, occurred there very early and with a thoroughness which is still in some ways unapproached” (ibid). Thus, over half a century ago, Williams first found British Romanticism and pastoralism particularly relevant to ecocritical theory.

Together, these examples from Rueckert, Meeker, Marx, and Williams constitute a minor fraction of the budding ideas which linked the literary field to the environmental sciences in the 1960s and beyond. Limited representation notwithstanding, all aforementioned texts demonstrate the growing pressure felt by literary critics, and all concerned citizens, to confront unchecked environmental destruction. Of course, the 1960s do not mark a firm beginning of dissatisfaction with the exploitation of the nonhuman environment; instead, highlighting titles from this period
offers the historical context immediately flanking the conception of the word “ecocriticism.” More accurately, the roots of this ideology extend much deeper, as “[e]cocritical awareness of the nonhuman world begins [. . .] not with the environmental revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but with a new definition of ‘Nature’ first offered by Romantic writers in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries” (Nichols xvi). This is not to suggest the timeline of human history from Romanticism to the 1960s resembles a linear movement of mounting environmental activism; rather, the recurrent theme of sustainability moves in a fluid rhythm, where the Romantic era and the 1960s both represent floods of concern, with an ebb in between. In the environmental concern flooding the 1960s and 1970s, literary critics, such as Marx and Williams, reevaluated literary traditions with an ecological emphasis and concluded with Rueckert’s suggested school of thought: ecocriticism.

Yet while the term originates in Rueckert’s 1978 essay, the movement of ecocriticism does not coincide with the inception of the word. In fact, the term seemed to lie dormant until the 1989 WLA conference in which a then-graduate student, Cheryll Glotfelty (1958– ), urged for its revival (Branch & O’Grady, “Introduction”). Since that meeting in 1989, usage of the term blossomed and shaped into a (slightly) more centered literary school of thought (ibid). Proof of this expansion is seen in the ballooning of ecocritical publications in the early- to mid-1990s: notable works include “Reevaluating Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism” (1990), by Glen Love; Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition (1991), by Jonathan Bate; The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (1995), by Lawrence Buell; and The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Gladwin). However, reference works on ecocriticism did not appear until the mid-2000s, such as The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment (2011), by Timothy Clark, or The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism (2014), edited by Greg Garrard (Gladwin). Thus, ecocriticism possesses a linguistic lineage which outdates its theoretical application and significant scholarly review; this lag time results in a literary movement established enough to demand acknowledgement but young enough to wrestle with a self-imposed defi-
This decade-long lapse between the origin of the term “ecocriticism” and the origin of the movement may be explained by the diversity of works which struggle to be defined by this single school of thought. While the term still does not warrant its own entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“eco-, comb. form”), *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* stresses, “Ecocriticism is not a method of analysis or interpretation but a redefined area of research and [rediscovery]” (Baldick). In essence, the only agreed upon use of “ecocriticism” is as an umbrella term for any work which falls into a subjective overlap of literature and ecology. The term “is vague and perhaps misleading” in that its use “identif[ies] a range of approaches to the study of literature” (Sarver 9); it does not imply one specific social theory or philosophy in the analysis of written texts, nor in the creation of new ones (Baldick). In fact, ecocriticism does not apply only to literary criticism: though primarily a “literary and cultural theory,” the word “is often used as a catchall term for any aspect of the humanities (e.g., media, film, philosophy, and history) addressing ecological issues” (Gladwin). While ecocritics still “aspire to a method,” ecocriticism, as it stands, only suggests a subject (Crockett 4).

This tendency to basically blanket any remotely ecologically-themed work in one all-encompassing term leads to an unwieldy beast of a theory. As the author of one position paper entitled “What is Ecocriticism?” admits, “I’m not sure I know what we mean by the term ‘ecocriticism,’ but it seems to be a term that is inclusive rather than exclusive” (Cook 4). Perhaps this inclusivity amasses a collection of works at times too loosely connected and, in turn, disjoints a cohesive literary criticism. In a sharp critique of modern ecocritical theory, *The Truth of Ecology* (2003), Dana Phillips (1958– ) supports this sentiment with the argument that “ecocriticism ought to be less devoted to pieties: that it ought to offend” (241). In a review of Phillips’ book, the editor of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Scott Slovic (1960– ), confesses that many scholars share Phillips’ opinion that “the community of nature writers and ecocritics has become too chummy and self-congratulatory—too self-satisfied and self-righteous” (75–76). This belief arises from a tendency of ecocritics to praise writers of the ecocritical canon—Ralph Waldo Emer-
son (1803–1883), John Muir (1838–1914), Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), and the like—more so than to call environmental narratives into question (Cohen 16–18). This is not to demonize the celebration of worthy environmental texts, nor to demand exclusivity. However, celebration must be balanced with the basic tenants of literary analysis and, by “decomposing texts into their constituent parts,” ask of every “environmental” work “how can these elements be composed more successfully, made more powerful, for the purposes of making a better world?” (Cohen 22). As such, the current imbalance between adoration and analysis, exacerbated by an all-embracing selection of media, may have delayed the growth of a centralize ecocritical movement.

Further stretching the distended boundaries of the ecocritical discourse, the length of history amplifies the difficulty in determining which literary works fit into the classification of ecocriticism. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary only traces the first use of the term “ecology” in English literature to an 1875 review of a botany textbook (“ecology, n.”). Notably, even in 1875 the reviewer did not consider the word to denote a field of science, capitalizing sciences such as “Botany” and “Zoology,” but not capitalizing “oecology” (Lankester 309). Thus, authors who published literary works before 1875 wrote in a period before ecology even established itself as a scientific division. This poses several challenges to defining which authors have composed work that ecocriticism should recognize: what are the markers of ecocritical writing in “pre-ecological” literature; and, to what degree can pre-ecological literature serve as a vehicle of modern ecological thought? The answers remain unclear.

Moreover, both pre- and post-1875 authors originate from various disciplines, which employ different vocabularies and engage different audiences. Leo Marx, for example, never uses the term “ecology” in The Machine in the Garden, yet he undeniably invokes the ecological theory of his time. As such, a keyword search would yield only a sliver of literary works which exist in the overlap of ecology and literature. Further, not all ecocritical works originate from traditional authors and poets: scientists, too, write works of ecocritical consequence. For instance, ecocritics often analyze Silent Spring (1962) by Rachel Carson (1907–1964), a marine biologist by profession, praising her book for “its politicization of ecology”
(Lousley 157). Also, ecocritics are as likely to consider Carson as they are to consider works by the poet John Keats, whose ballad “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1819) Carson invokes in her novel’s epigraph: “The sedge is wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing” (Foote 742). Certainly, the contents of both works weave together literature and the environment, yet the authors operate in disciplines often perceived to be unrelated, and they convey their messages through seemingly unconnected genres. This perceived divide between the authors’ disciplines is a significant difference to note, as ecocritics are primarily literary critics concentrating in other genres and revaluing their literary specialization with an ecological lens. A result of this specialization, combined with ecocritics’ urge to be “inclusive rather than exclusive,” is seen in the ecocritical reference manuals assembled in the mid-2000s (Cook 4). Though *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* claims its scale should not lead a reader to “the erroneous conclusion that it pretends to be comprehensive, when in fact it seeks only to be reasonably inclusive” (Garrard, “Introduction” 4), this handbook becomes less a manual for dissecting ecocriticism than a conglomerate of specialized essays barely held together by a central theme. Literary critics dabbling in ecocriticism seem to focus more on niche subcategories of authors, such as ecofeminists (Alaimo 188), Japanese ecocritics (Masa-mi 519), or queer biopoliticians (Sandilands 305), than upon defining a cohesive school of thought. Thus, while “literature plus ecology” appears a simple formula for deducing a literary work’s suitability for ecocritical analysis, the dissimilarities in profession and focus between these authors make determining this margin of convergence much more complex.

The complexities inherent in an inclusive approach to ecocritical discourse reveals that ecocriticism still suffers from the troubles of a young theory in its pliable state. However, it is important to note that the majority of ecocritics find agreement on some topics of consequence. In terms of literary eras, most scholars agree that the British Romantic period constitutes one of the single most abundant periods for the development of ecocritical works, if not *the* most significant (Baldick). As such “much ecocritical work has [. . .] been devoted to the English Romantic tradition” (ibid). Key examples previously discussed in this chapter elude to the connective tissue between Romanticism and ecocriticism. For example, in the
literary era leading up to the inception of Rueckert’s essay, Williams’ *The Country and the City* divulges an early association between Romanticism and “pre-ecocriticism.” Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* indicates that this link remained strong during the revival of the term and the rise of the ecocritical movement in the 1990s. Further, scholars consider Romantic writers to be the source of the very notion of “Nature” upon which this ideology seeks to define itself (Nichols xvi). As such, it is not particularly surprising that “the primary foci of ecocritical interest in Romanticism have been the new ways for viewing and valuing, representing and relating to the natural world that emerged during that period” (Rigby 162). Ultimately, though modern ecocritical theory still warrants unification, few scholars, if any, would reject British Romanticism’s claim as the major stakeholder of ecocriticism.

Likewise, ecocritics gravitate towards a few unifying trends in terms of genre. In general, ecocritics “have tended to work on nonfiction and poetry, and fiction and drama less often” (Garrard, “Introduction” 16). This is not to suggest that ecocritics do not find value in fiction and drama: *The Comedy of Survival* remains a monumental work of ecocritical theory, and its focus is on revaluing dramatic motifs under ecological principles. However, some genres seem especially suited for ecocritical review. Poetry, in particular, has been “hailed from the onset. Scholars have sought to assess how ecocentric various poets and poems are, or have made more or less tenuous claims about how poetic form might itself be seen as ‘ecological’” (Garrard, “Introduction” 18). Thus, while the field of ecocriticism remains relatively amorphous, an analysis of poetic works, particularly from the British Romantic era, seems likely to withstand the restructuring, and re-restructuring, expected in the theory’s imminent future.

Though ecocritics generally emphasize Romanticism and poetry, and still wield an inclusivity which borders on unmanageable, current ecocritical theorists also are beginning to erect some partitions. Modern ecocritics are turning away from the pastoral focus found in predecessors such as Leo Marx and Raymond Williams. The new wave of ecocritics follow a startling trend which considers all of Romantic pastoralism (indeed, pastoralism in general) to be inconsequential (Phillips 146) or, worse, to be detrimental to modern environmental aims (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 63). Development
of the theory necessitates more rigidity of definition and, as such, must challenge the place of particular tropes in establishing the discourse of ecocriticism. However, the following chapters seek to address some of the most prevalent challenges to the ecocritical value of pastoralism in hopes that a complete rejection of the pastoral tradition may be reevaluated.

To conclude, the abbreviated context of the previous pages attempts to sketch the expectations, disputations, and limitations of contemporary ecocritical theory. This chapter does not pretend to elucidate the broad definition of ecocriticism suggested in the first paragraphs, which defines ecocriticism merely as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xvii). Rather, this brief review traces the origin of the term, the complications of the movement, and the roots of the theory in order to highlight the entanglement of Romanticism, pastoralism, and ecocriticism present from the latter theory’s foundation. As modern ecocritics draw a line in the sand, a line which encompasses Romanticism yet banishes pastoralism, this thesis seeks to utilize elements upon which modern ecocritics agree—namely, Romantic poetry—to question that division.


Cokinos, Christopher. “What is Ecocriticism?” Branch & O’Grady, pp. 3.


---

**Works Referenced**


In a remote section of the western Pacific Ocean, the deepest (known) natural point on Earth is the Mariana Trench. The trench gouges into the meat of the Earth deep enough to engulf the tallest human-made structure, Burj Khalifa, thirteen times over (Goldmeier). Searching for this location—the deepest depths of the oceans—is a practice dating back to 1521; but, despite an historic fascination, few artificial devices have ventured to 36,000 feet beneath the waters’ surface (Gardner et al. 1). While scientists still strive to venture there, the reaches of human pollution outpace the reaches of human technology. Even at these treacherous depths, a plastic bag flows through the currents (Gibbens). It seems that no crevasse of the Earth remains which humanity has not corrupted.

The oceans carry a heavier burden than a single plastic bag, but the discovery of pollution at such depths embodies symbolic evidence that the line between humanity and wilderness is irreversibly blurred (ibid). As such, ecocritics are beginning to question the value of a literary form...
in which poets praise a rural countryside or a wilderness which, they claim, no longer exists. This literary type—pastoralism—leads some scholars to consider its trope of comparing villages to cities, or villagers to city dwellers, irrelevant in an era which erases the definite distinction between “urban” and “nature” (Bracke 435). As a result of arranging this juxtaposition, some ecocritics argue that this pastoral tradition “not only obscures the genre’s urban roots but also diverts attention from the city as both a unique environment in its own right and a powerful force affecting other environments” (Philippon 397).

Ecocritics with this belief cite numerous examples of rural life being contrasted with urban life in Romantic pastoralism. Listed here are only a few of such examples. One of the early Romantics, William Blake, uses these sharp contrasts in his “Introduction to Songs of Innocence” (1794), where a narrative “I” functions as a piping shepherd who pipes, “a song about a Lamb!” and pipes “with merry chear” (ll. 5–6). The poem concludes with a reference to the simplicity and felicity of rural life:

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain’d the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear

[ll. 17–20]

By contrast, from the first line, Blake’s poem “London” (1794) finds urban life devoid of such merriment:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

[ll. 1–4]

Much Romantic pastoral poetry which does not criticize urban life still highlights a pleasantness surrounding the ideal rural life. This general
pleasantness creates the setting at the start of pieces such as “Shepherd and Nymph” from *Gebir* (1798), by Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864):

> ‘Twas evening, though not sun-set, and spring-tide  
> Level with these green meadows, seem’d still higher;  
> ‘Twas pleasant: and I loosen’d from my neck  
> The pipe you gave me, and began to play.  
>  
> [ll. 1–4]

Yet, even when writing about tragedies, some ecocritics believe the themes in pastoral elegies suggest a connective tissue between nature and rural folk which transcends the grave. Such an example is offered in Shelley’s “Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats” (1821), when the fallen Adonais “is made one with Nature” (l. 370). Some scholars argue that this “one[ness]” occurs because the pastoral “assumes that natural men are purer and less vicious than cultivated men, and that there exists between them and Nature a special sympathy” (Kermode 19). Thus, through only a few examples, ecocritics begin to pursue the argument that pastoralism functions through a comparison of “natural” and urban, with an emphasis on a simplicity and pleasure “innate” to rural life and an accompanying negative representation of “the town” (Webster, Personal).

To understand the argument being proposed, operant definitions are necessary. The word “nature” is perhaps one of the most complex words in the English language (Williams, *Keywords* 219). *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) offers ten alternative uses before reaching a definition most consistent with ecocriticism: “The phenomena of the physical world collectively; esp. plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations” (‘nature, n.”). Some ecocritics would consider even this definition outdated, as an “oppos[ition]” between human and nature makes little sense if humans are a product of, and a part of, nature (“nature, n.”). The trouble with including humans and their creations in a definition of nature is the potential for anthropocentric justifications: “if humans are indeed ‘part of nature,’ then every human activity is as natural as every other” (Philip-
pon 396). To avoid legitimizing unrestrained human action as “natural,” the significance of the *OED*’s definition of nature, instead, is its emphasis of nonhuman entities.

The *OED*’s reference to nature as a “collect[ive]” stems from the Romantic idea of nature which first suggests a “holistic understanding of the natural world” (McKusick 200). Romantic philosophy extended deeper than nonhuman animals; all natural entities found connectivity in British Romantic poetry. Romantic poets had different terms for this connective nature. Cowper, in his poem “Hope” (1782), calls it “Unconscious nature,” including “Rocks, groves and streams” (ll. 740–741). Coleridge, in “The Eolian Harp” (1796), references “the one Life, within us and abroad, / Which meets all Motion, and becomes its soul, / A Light in Sound, a sound-like power in Light” (ll. 26–28). Wordsworth, in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798), also mentions this “motion”: “A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things” (ll. 101–103). Whether it is called a “consciousness,” a “sound-like power,” a “motion,” or a “spirit,” this unknown entity—bordering, at times, on a divinity—tethers the human and nonhuman together within a cohesive idea of “nature” (Nichols 24). Wordsworth describes this in “[. . .] Tintern Abbey”:

—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

[ll. 94–100]

Contemporary poets still mirror this connectivity. For example, Dylan Thomas (1914–1953), in “The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” (1934), finds fascination in the fact that “The force that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my red blood” (ll.
6–7). Scientific advancements, too, can now identify this relationship: a recycling of atoms, a universal law of physics, or a biosphere in which all biotic and abiotic entities share resources. In this way, some literary critics consider British Romantic poetry as “the first literature to anticipate contemporary biological conceptions” (qtd. in McKusick 201). As such, poets like “[. . .] Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley were ‘proto-ecological’ in their intellectual orientation” (ibid). This orientation included a particular interest in pristine environments, noted in the previous references to “Rocks, groves and streams” (Cowper ll. 740–741) or “setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky” (Wordsworth ll. 98–100). As such, it is this collective, proto-ecological concept of nature, with an emphasis on pristine wilderness, which ecocritics seem to reference when using the term “nature” as a Romantic worldview.

By comparison, the word “urban” has a less poetic meaning. The *OED* defines “urban” as “relating to, situated or occurring in, or characteristic of, a town or city, esp. as opposed to the countryside” (“urban, adj. and n.”). Two significant ideas reside in this definition. First, “urban” implies some relation to a town or city. While this may seem self-evident, the characteristics which define a town or city can be difficult to determine. Some European reports on urban ecology “define urbanization as a spatial phenomenon: the concentration of population” (Niemela et al. 193). In addition to population density, other legal approaches to defining urban areas in England include the “*built-up area*,” meaning the area of brick and mortar buildings and artificial structures (Office of National Statistics). This contrasts with the definition of nature, which opposes “human creations” (“nature, n.”). Other legal boundaries of urban areas include the “*functional area*,” meaning the area providing services or facilities, which encompasses both the built-up area and the “tracts of surrounding countryside if the population in these surrounding areas depends on the urban centre for services and employment” (Office of National Statistics). Thus, urban areas may be considered concrete, bound by human-made structures; or abstract, bound by functions significant to humans.

The second notable idea in the *OED* definition of “urban” is that
“opposition to the countryside” clarifies the term’s meaning (“urban, adj. and n.”). This thread of opposition is similar to the *OED* definition of nature, in that the complex ideas behind each word seem most elucidated under comparison. This comparison is not limited to linguistic taxonomy: legal definitions also rely on comparison. According to the Office for National Statistics, “Generally, the terminology ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ has no fundamental definitional basis. The starting point in the definition of urban areas in England [. . .] is the identification of areas with *land use* which is irreversibly urban in character.” Though the United Kingdom’s glossary of census terms routinely updates, the boundaries of urban areas continue to mirror this language: “the perimeter of areas of land identified by Ordnance Survey as *irreversibly urban in their use*” (10; emphasis added). This dichotomy of urban and rural preceding a landscape legally defined as “irreversibly urban in character” suggests a process of urbanization, a process which builds upon a rural area to a point which cannot be reversed (Office for National Statistics). “Towns”, “villages”, and “hamlets” are all terms which fall amid this continuum of land use, each defined by population densities which the government continually reevaluates. Ultimately, the extremities are easiest to conceptualize: a rural area, versus an area unable to return to being rural. Linguistically and legally, definitions of urban use comparison to identify distinctions and to better understand these two extremes.

This tendency to compare the urban to the rural in crafting language-level definitions and legal boundaries mirrors the tendency for comparison in pastoral poetry. Some scholars of English pastoral poetry claim that the “first condition of pastoral poetry is that there should be a sharp difference between two ways of life, the rustic and the urban” (Kermode 14). These critics believe that, “Pastoral depends upon an opposition between the simple, or natural, and the cultivated. Although this opposition can be complex, the bulk of pastoral poetry treats it quite simply [. . .]” (Kermode 19, emphasis added). Some ecocritics argue that such a comparison cannot be made under contemporary ecological circumstances.

In the modern era, some ecocritics believe the difference between rustic and urban life may no longer be so “sharp” (Kermode 14). An ex-
ample of this shift in resolution can be seen in a practice epitomizing rural life: farming. Since the inception of agricultural practices over 10,000 years ago, humans have altered the genetic makeup of crops (Caradonna 3). Original methods included the crude mechanisms of trial and error by selecting the strongest crops, encouraging disease-resistance, and selectively replanting seeds (Ronald 559). But consumption soon outpaced agricultural production. To accommodate population growth, “More land was converted to cropland in the 30 years after 1950 than in the 150 years between 1700 and 1850,” the latter being the period within which the British Romantic era falls (“Millennium” 2). As of 2005, cultivated systems covered “one quarter of Earth’s terrestrial surface” (ibid). In terms of scope, then, ecological issues are certainly magnified.

Further, this land use differs from farming practices of the Agricultural Revolution (Caradonna 3). For example, land conversion included disruption of other forms of wilderness—old-growth forests or rainforests—into rural cropland; and stripping trees from a landscape for developing farmland cannot be pretended as a “natural” land use any more than developing another Manhattan. Moreover, the crops planted now differ from traditional concepts of “natural.” Genetic engineering became a systematic, scientific procedure; alteration of plants at a genetic level became both a targeted and expedited process (Ronald 559). Modern farmers plant genetically engineered seeds which harbor the mark of humanity within their very DNA. For the first time in history, the seed of a transgenic plant, as a product of scientific advancement, can be considered intellectual property, and, thus, can be patented. Modern corporations now own the reproductive unit of a plant, thus disrupting the age-old practice of replanting seeds, and enforcing this disruption through lawsuits against, and surveillance of, a farmer’s property (Nizamuddin 4). Considering rural life as a “simplicity” separate from urban life seems impossible in an era where corporate demands dictate production, and agriculture becomes more of a commodity than a necessity (Nizamuddin 1).

This blurred divide between rural and urban life also functions in reverse. Urban ecologists argue that the city must be considered a habitat unto itself (Niemelä et al. 5). The human habitat, now reaching over
all corners of the Earth, overlaps with nonhuman habitats, and many nonhuman entities evolve to survive under new selective pressures. Birds offer a diverse example. With increased access to food, city birds learn skills divergent from their country counterparts: in the city, tits and corvids learn to remove milk bottle lids, and Carrion Crows learn to use cars as nutcrackers (Niemelä \textit{et al.} 142–143). Human inventions became tools for nonhuman advantage. More so than tools, artificial structures also became nesting grounds. Hawks now roost “on skyscrapers along Central Park East and Central Park West” in dense populations (Nichols xiii). “The City” became, or is now finally recognized as, an ecosystem.

Further, some case studies suggest that forcing a division between nonhuman entities and cities does not necessarily better protect these species. J. Baird Callicott (1941–) uses an anecdotal example in his essay, “Whither Conservation Ethics?” In the Sonoran Desert, two oases lie within 30 miles of each other. The northern oasis is a protected bird sanctuary which allows no human activity, save bird watching. By contrast, the southern oasis is farmed in a traditional Papagao manner. Upon “[v]isiting the oases ‘on back-to-back days three times during one year,’” [. . .ornithologists] found fewer than 32 species of birds the Park Service’s bird sanctuary but more than 65 species at the farmed oasis” (Callicot 20). In this sense, the absence of humanity does not equate to conservation. Since humanity cannot feign absence, and many experts agree that “[i]ndustrial societies can never go back to some idealized, pre-industrial ecotopia,” then ecocritics believe that revering such a division in pastoralism serves little ecological purpose (Caradonna 20). If ecocritics are correct in stating that the English pastoral necessitates a false rigidity between “two ways of life, the rustic and the urban,” then ecocritics may be wise to question the comparison (Kermode 14).

Thus, some ecocritics believe that erecting a comparison between urban life and rural life constitutes what philosophers call a “category mistake” (Philippon 394). That is, considering the urban as a separate “category” of lifestyle is an effort of logic or semantics in the context of the modern era, and it is no longer reflective of a modern definition of nature. This overarching category is given various names by ecocritics. Some craft novel terms, such as \textit{urbanature}, and blend the boundaries of
urban and rural (Nichols xiii). These ecocritics argue that the “interconnectedness demanded by urbanature insists that human beings are not out of nature when they stand in the streets of Manhattan any more than they are in nature when they stand above tree-line in Montana” (Nichols xiii). Other ecocritics—including some present from the inception of the ecocritical movement—borrow scientific language. Such critics argue that “[in] most literary theory[,] ‘the world’ is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere” (Glotfelty 6). In using this expansive idea of an ecosphere, “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world,” and that cultural artifacts, such as language and literature, reflect an irreversible entanglement of humanity and nature (ibid). This merging of human habitat and technology with nonhuman entities rejects a “nature/society” dichotomy and leads some scholars to the conclusion that “There is no ‘real nature’ to which to return” (Nichols xiii).

This argument presents several faults in logic. First, British Romantic authors “never deny the fusion of human and nature” (Webster, Personal). The Romantic idea of nature was previously defined as a “collect[ive]” which stems from a “holistic understanding of the natural world” (McKusick 200). A “holistic” model does not demand human dominance over or displacement of nature; rather, Romantic writers argued for a balance between the two (Webster, Personal). This plea for harmony appears evident in British Romantic poetry. For example, ecocritics often cite Wordsworth’s “[. . .] Tintern Abbey” as an appraisal of a pristine landscape. Yet the narrative “I” references evidence of human life:

> [...] Once again I see
> These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
> Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
> Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
> Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
> [ll. 14–18]
From the poem’s opening stanza, even a “wild secluded scene” (l. 6) includes a view of a “cottage-ground” (l. 11). The “wreaths of smoke” (l. 17) distinguish humanity’s mark on the wilderness; yet, this mark is not a blemish. Wordsworth celebrates the vision of nature with the same dignity as a “houseless woods” (l. 20). Further, the images of nature often imply an unseen connection between humankind and nature. The poem’s speaker looks over “orchard-tufts” (l. 11)—a product of careful cultivation, not wildness.

Further, modern ecocritics appear to be searching for a single representation of nature, one which now praises urban landscapes as unique ecosystems and overshadows previous “outdated” representations of a Romantic “Nature,” which ecocritics feel over-value pristine wilderness. Poetry, as a cultural artifact which reflects the values of its era, can track these changing representations of nature (Glotfely 6). This is what led proto-ecocritics, such as Raymond Williams, to believe that poetry acknowledges that “the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history” (“Ideas of Nature” 68). Thus, most scholars agree that representations of nature can shift, and that poetry can trace these shifts. The fault, however, is assuming that a shifting conception of nature is a linear process. In his philosophical work, political ecologist and anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1952–) argues that nature exists in multiple “regimes” or worldviews. Many scholars accept that nature “is differently experienced according to one’s social position and that it is differently produced by different groups or in different historical periods. These assertions, however, imply a modern order in which experience can be gauged according to modern forms of production and social relations” (Escobar 5). This implication, he argues, is incorrect. “Nature” has multiple meanings which “coexist and overlap” (Escobar 5). Considering a pluralist view of nature, it is counterproductive to measure the value of cultural artifacts—such as pastoral poetry—according to “a modern order,” and it is destructive to seek a single worldview of nature by denigrating other paradigms (ibid).

By recognizing that shifting ideas of nature are valid, poetry can then be used to track what modern ecocritics interpret as Romanticism’s “idealized” nature or rural lifestyle. This idea of a distinct rural nature,
one which urbanization “drives out,” must originate from some source. In *The Country and The City* (1973), Williams recalls reviewing a book which claimed that “A way of life that has come down to us from the days of Virgil has suddenly ended [. . .]. A whole culture that had preserved its continuity from earliest times had now received it quietus” (9). Williams finds this perspective “curious”; and, through his curiosity, he discovers that major writers of every generation claimed they lived in the era witnessing the extinction of rural life in England (*The Country* 9). Though not unique to pastoralism, nor Romanticism, this theme of lament runs through the sub-genre’s history. John Clare, in his poem “Helpston” (1809), calls out to a pristine, prelapsarian nature: “Oh, happy Eden of those golden years” (1. 141). Williams traces “those golden years” to the rural England of Clare’s boyhood in the 1790s. Other scholars support this interpretation, claiming Clare calls on a nostalgia for “the old landscape of Helpston” and “for his childhood, the memory of which the landscape can revive but which it cannot restore” (Barrell 112). A longing for both leads Clare “to twist these two strands of meaning into one, by saying that his childhood was so bound up in the old landscape that, when the landscape disappeared, his childhood disappeared with it” (ibid). Yet in the 1780s, George Crabbe (1754–1832) wrote in the first book of *The Village* (1783) that this “old” landscape—Clare’s “Eden”—was actually a corrupted version of rural England, merely the remnants of a better time:

```
Fled are those times, if e’er such times were seen,
When rustic poets praised their native green;
No shepherds now, in smooth alternate verse,
Their country’s beauty or their nymphs’ rehearse;
[ll. 8–10]
```

Crabbe, instead, traces the “Golden Age” to Virgil (70 B.C.E.–19 B.C.E):

```
On Minicio’s banks, in Caesar’s bounteous reign,
If Tityrus found the Golden Age again,
```

47
Must sleepy bards the flattering dream prolong,
Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song?
From truth and nature shall we widely stray,
Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?

[ll. 15–20]

This eternal backwards glance may simply be dismissed as nostalgia for an old England, and a longing for the Golden Age, “if e’er such times were seen” (1. 8). However, Williams is not dismissive of this pattern. Rather, he argues that what seems to be “a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement: Old England, settlement, the rural virtues—all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question” (Williams, The Country 12). In order to decipher these values of nature—the values which ecocritics critique—“the pastoral” must be traced back to Virgil.

Of course, Virgil seems often miscredited as the origin of pastoralism and mistaken as living in the ideal era of nature. This origin is what ecocritics mention when they cast doubt on the efficacy of pastoralism as a sub-genre, such as when Dana Phillips states, “I doubt that the pastoral (as conceived along traditional lines) will help us confront the environmental crisis head on” (146). Yet, understanding the pastoral “as conceived along traditional lines” (ibid) demands untangling a history between humans and nature far preceding Virgil. In the 4th century B.C.E., ancient Greeks colonized the island of Sicily to shepherd flocks (Heath-Stubbs 1). Every year, the shepherds celebrated at festivals with eruptions of song dedicated to their deities: Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon; Daphnis, legendary Sicilian herdsman and demigod; and Pan, god of the wild, of the shepherds, and of the flocks. Young men exchanged stanzas on themes of rural merriment: “the old legends of the country-side, or of rustic love-making, or the simple incidents of the pastoral life” (Chambers xxii). While some speculate that this tradition dates back six centuries before Christ, even to the mythic Daphnis himself, the only substantiated evidence leads to the Alexandrine Theocritus (316 B.C.E.–260 B.C.E.) as the credited creator of the pastoral “as a deliber-
ate literary form” (ibid).

Theocritus, born in Syracuse, Sicily, grew entrenched in the traditional festival songs of the Sicilian herdsmen. Though raised in the country, at the time of writing his poetry Theocritus lived in the “highly sophisticated and urbanized city of Alexandria” (Heath-Stubbs 1). Contrary to the belief of many ecocritics, the concept of urbanization, even at the inception of pastoralism, was not novel. The pastoral was not birthed in “some idealized, pre-industrial ecotopia” (Caradonna 20). Rather, living amid the bustling courts of Ptolemaic Egypt, Theocritus molded his poetry in the form of rural traditions. His poems were called *eidyllia*—idylls, in modern English—a diminutive of the Greek *eidos*, and a false cognate of “idle” or “ideal,” which instead means “little picture” (“idyll | idyl, n.”). In many ways, his poems were a little picture, an image through which he captured short mythological narratives, dramatic tales of urban characters, and bucolic scenes from rural life (Heath-Stubbs 2–3).

Scholars still debate the purpose of Theocritus’ bucolic poetry. Some literary critics believe that it expressed Theocritus’ own longing for the flocks of his boyhood (Chambers xxii), much as scholars claim that Clare longed for the Helpston of his youth. Markedly, Theocritus’ idylls often mirror that structures and themes of the herdsmen’s festivals of his homeland. His “Idyll VIII” is written as an exchange of stanzas between two dramatic figures, much as festival singing took a conversational form. He names one speaker as Daphnis, the mythic herdsman celebrated at many festivals of Theocritus’ childhood (ibid). However, most critics suggest that his poetry was crafted for the particular tastes of the Alexandrian courts, where a nostalgia for country life, “and a tendency to idealize it,” first grew (Heath-Stubbs 2). In the same idyll, Theocritus applies a morality to the shepherd, Daphnis:

I ask not gold, I ask not the broad lands of a king;
I ask not to be fleeter than the breeze;
But ‘neath this steep to watch my sheep, feeding as one, and fling
(Still clasping her) my carol o’er the seas

[ll. 54–58]
Daphnis, a representative of rural life, shuns a craving for power and wealth in favor of simplicity: tending his flocks, and experiencing the natural landscape. This heightened morality begins to reveal “a divine nativity,” or a Christ-like representation, allocated to shepherds, in which “[t]heir craft endows them with a kind of purity, almost a holiness” (Kermode 17). Such characteristics are less representative of Theocritus’ childhood realities and more representative of an inspiring dramatic figure designed for an urbanized readership to value.

Because of this “divine nativity,” ecocritics are not the first to question the genre. From the onset of pastoralism, a criticism of artificiality arose (Kermode 17). The idea of this poetic style as artificial is multifaceted (“Theocritus”). At a language level, scholars agree that “Theocritus’ dialect is ‘artificial’ [. . .] i.e., it does not correspond to any dialect actually spoken anywhere at any time” (Rossi 293). He uses a blend of Doric, which is unrepresentative of his native tongue in Syracuse, and of the native tongue of his readership in Alexandria (Chambers xxii). The criticism of this lies in attributing language to shepherds which would have been beyond their capacity (Editors). Yet, this feature is not a particularly damning revelation, as many poets used (and use) language atypical of their era without diminishing the value of the work. Poetry is “the most compressed form of language,” and such compaction permits divergence from the vernacular (Stallworthy 1252). In particular, poets who write in highly structured forms rearrange common phrases to fit specific meters, shuffle dialogue to the “grouping and spacing of sounds,” and substitute perhaps more realistic words to fit rhyme schemes (Stallworthy 1251). Thus, this level of “artificiality” in original pastoralism does not seem to warrant any more defense than poetry as a literary genre would require.

However, ecocritics seem preoccupied with the artificiality suggested by the themes of simplicity and felicity as innate to rural life but as excluded from urban life. Theocritus’ poetry was a partial representation of a Sicilian shepherd’s life, based upon the traditions of festival song. The selectivity is not an inherently untrue representation. Theocritus did not seek in every poem to document the daily toil of each worker; rather, in some poems, he chose to highlight the traditions of festivals steeped in merriment and to offer these traditions, in a new genre, to a wider au-
dience. In such instances, “pastoral is not the poetry of country life, but the poetry of the townsman’s dream of country life” (Chambers xxxix). Other critics defend even the idealized poems, claiming they are “idealized only in so far as the harsher aspects are omitted” (Heath-Stubbs 3). At times, Theocritus does not omit this harshness but diminishes its presence. For example, in his “Idyll VIII,” hardships of shepherding are reduced to two lines: “O spare, good wolf, my weanlings! their milky mothers spare! / Harm not the little lad that hath so many in his care!” (ll. 65–66). In such representations of idealized rural life, Theocritus offers a partial truth concerning the realities of Sicilian shepherding; yet his selectivity fluctuates with the intentions of each poem. To only acknowledge these idealized poems is to disregard the entirety of the pastoral tradition.

This fluctuation of selectivity suggests that the pastoral, “as it was originally conceived,” did not pretend at perfection of the countryside (Phillips 146). The pastoral did not configure comparisons as a claim that urbanized life was joyless, but to remind an urban readership of the joys which could be experienced in country life—an experience from which many readers were detached. In truth, even in the 4th century B.C.E, the way of shepherding-life was slowly eclipsed by serfdom on the estates of large-scale landlords (Heath-Stubbs 3). These entities shifted the natural landscape and planted the seeds of urbanization. Thus, while the “[p]astoral is [often] an urban product,” this poetic sub-genre was not an urban fabrication (Kermode 15). Instead, the pastoral served as a mechanism for reminding the urban readership that love, labor, life, and death existed outside the confines of the bustling city.

Such a reminder was necessary in an era where rural life was beginning to be viewed as not only separate but also inferior. Theocritus touches on this elitism in his “Idyll XX”—entitled “Town and Country” by translator Charles S. Calverley (1831–1884)—where a city maiden scorns a “wretched Neteheard” (an archaic term for a tender of cows or oxen):

[...] a sorry clown kiss me?
Your country compliments, I like not such;
No lips but gentles’ would I deign to touch.
Ne’er dream of kissing me: alike I shun
Your face, your language, and your tigerish fun.

[ll. 2–6]

Rather than simplicity of a “country” worker equating to felicity or even divinity, this simplicity instead becomes a baseness when compared to the superiority of “gentles” lips (1. 4). The sentiment is not subtle; the city maiden’s insults increase in acidity: “Pah! you’ve a sick man’s lips, a blackamoor’s hand: / Your breath’s defilement. Leave me, I command” (ll. 9–10). The city maiden not only insults his general appearance but devalues the evidence of rustic work: hands blackened by dirt, marked by a labor to nature, serve to defile a city dweller (l. 9). In this way, Theocritus’ pastorals did not erect false comparisons between rural and urban vantages; his pastorals served as social commentary on distinctions which, in his era of value systems, truly existed. With attentiveness to this social division, ecocritics cannot pretend that urban life and rural life in traditional pastoralism fall into a single, homogeneous category. And though original pastorals fail to represent such urbanature (Nichols xiii), the paradigm of nature which the poems do represent remains valid and remains able to inform modern ecological and social issues (Escobar 5).

Only after Theocritus and the fall of the Greek empire did the representation of nature transition to the Roman poet Virgil (70 B.C.E.–19 B.C.E.)—the man to whom many ascribe pastoralism and the roots of an idealized rural life. Virgil translated the pastoral of his Greek predecessor into the Italian peasantry (Chambers xxiii). The Italy of Virgil’s lifetime was ravished by human-wrought destruction, caught in the crossfire of a civil war from which the adopted son of Gaius Julius Caesar (100 B.C.E.–44 B.C.E.), Octavius (later Emperor Augustus) [63 B.C.E.–14 B.C.E.], eventually emerged victorious (Heath-Stubbs 6). The life of Italian peasantry was far from Crabbe’s “Golden Age” (l. 16); peasants were slaughtered, their lands confiscated. Virgil himself lost his family’s farmland during the wars (Heath-Stubbs 6). His poetry tracks this shifting landscape. In his first work in The Eclogues (38 B.C.E.), Virgil creates a dialogue featuring Titryus, a dramatic figure who some scholars claim
represents the poet himself (Heath-Stubbs 6), and also a reoccurring figure in Romantic works: e.g., “If Tityrus found the Golden Age again” (Clare l. 16). In The Ecologues, Tityrus speaks with Meliobeus, a shepherd who has lost his estates. The woeful shepherd laments at his un-ideal situation:

Ah, shall I ever, long years hence, look again on my country’s bounds, on my humble cottage with its turf-clad roof—shall I, long years hence, look amazed on a few ears of corn, once my kingdom? Is a godless soldier to hold these well-tilled fallows? a barbarian these crops? See where strife has brought our unhappy citizens! For these have we sown our fields! [9]

This is certainly not a pastoral of simplicity nor of pleasantry. This is a lament for the “humble cottage,” confiscated, ruined, at the hands of “godless soldiers” and “barbari[c]” men (Fairclough 9). Woven into these lines is a criticism of the political establishment—a product of urban life—which allowed for such destruction to encroach on rural life (Heath-Stubbs 7). Even in the time of Virgil, in the supposed Golden Age of nature, the pastoral remained necessary for recognizing rural life, a lifestyle which was not only distinct from urban life but threatened by the latter’s expansion.

From the roots of pastoralism, it is possible to see that this genre arose in an era with ecological challenges common to contemporary nature. Ancient ecological issues are recycled under new names. In Virgil’s time, the practice of independent shepherding and farming died out to serfdom under large-scale landlords (Heath-Stubbs 3). In a modern era, multinational corporations monopolize ownership of seeds, and through “strict patent rights, local producers are forced to buy seeds that can only be used once, thereby fostering a feudalistic relationship of perpetual dependence” (Nizamuddin 2). Modern serfdom merely traded lords for corporations. Warfare terrorized landscapes then, and it continues to ravish landscapes now. Prejudices which divided rural and urban lifestyles still exist. For modern ecocritics to suggest that the pastoral originates in so removed an era, an era in which some conception of “urban” and “nature” managed to exist without overlap, suggests that these scholars misinterpret the history of and the value of the pastoral. The pastoral nostalgia which can be traced
back to Virgil does not demand a representation of a pristine nature as an expectation; the ideal, instead, exists as a reminder—much as Theocritus’ idylls reminded the Alexandrians—that humanity can strive towards an ultimate form of sustainable, rural life “[w]hich in many ways is a conscious attempt to ‘return’ not to pre-industrial society per se, but to a time when humans tread more lightly upon the Earth” (Caradonna 27).

Through this brief history of the pastoral sub-genre, a few central ideas deserve reinforcement. First, the pastoral did not originate in an era in which nature was conceived as perfection and as distinct from the hands of humankind. Original pastorals recognized discrimination, warfare, estate seizure, and other miseries which transcended arbitrary boundaries of “urban” and “rural” settlements. Secondly, pastoral representations of a pristine, simple nature are merely selective in two ways: a) poems which offer these representations highlight the pleasing portions of rural life for thematic effect, not for realistic documentation; and b) poems which offer these representations constitute a fraction of all pastoral poetry. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the human-made dangers plaguing civilization at the conception of pastoralism show more relation to issues impacting modern ecocritics’ urbanature than these scholars seem to credit (Nichols xiii). As such, their new conceptualization of nature need not supersede pastoral conceptualizations of nature, including representations of urban and rural as two distinct lifestyles; and the cultural artifacts which remain of Virgil’s era may still inform modern ecological thought.

Of course, the roots of pastoralism do not necessarily reflect the entirety of the tradition. Some ecocritics recognize that the sub-genre originates from a form of urbanization but that pastoral’s later execution “not only obscures the genre’s urban roots but also diverts attention from the city as both a unique environment in its own right and a powerful force affecting other environments” (Philippon 397). Such an argument could be refuted using previous examples from the poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, which show the expansion of urbanization as a “powerful force”—one that re-sculpted the British landscape to mainly devastating ends (ibid). However, the arguments against pastoralism’s literary legacy are best addressed through British Romanticism: many ecocritics still lack
unification on the value of the pastoral, but few scholars, if any, would reject Romanticism’s claim as the major stakeholder in the field (Rigby 62). Further, by analyzing a single poem from this period, the process of deconstructing poetry in ecocritical detail hopes to be explored.

A representative example of the pastoral legacy in British Romantic poetry lies in “The Deserted Village, A Poem” (1770) by Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774). It is futile to pretend that a single poem represents an entire literary period. Yet this poem functions well as a specimen for dissection due to the directness of its pastoral lineage, literary scholars believing that “The Deserted Village owes much of its interminglings of reality, fantasy, and pastoral to Virgil’s Eclogues” (Arkins 31). Further, the popularity of the poem resulted in a “global reach,” a scope which led some contemporary literary critics to consider the piece “a truly transnational text” (Hessell 645). This popularity means that ecocritics commonly reference the piece; however, they rarely analyze it, and often dismiss its purpose as solely one of “criticizing the negative impact of modernisation on rural life” (Rigby 69). In actuality, the poem’s relevance in terms of a direct pastoral relationship and a wide readership suggest that the piece may generally indicate whether Romantic pastoralism informs or “obscures the genre’s urban roots” (Philippon 397).

Moreover, “The Deserted Village” holds some credibility over ecocritical accusations of pastoralism’s artificiality. In the poem’s original dedication to Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), Goldsmith preemptively addressed the criticism that “the disorders it laments are only to be found in the poet’s own imagination” (“Preface” 84). He writes:

To this I can scarce make any other answer than that I sincerely believe what I have written; that I have taken all possible pains, in my country excursions, for these four or five years past, to be certain of what I allledge; and that all my views and enquiries have led me to believe those miseries real, which I here attempt to display. [Goldsmith, “Preface”]
Such an address serves Goldsmith’s credibility well. While Raymond Williams cautions the “sharpest scepticism” against “sentimental and intellectualised accounts of an unlocalised ‘Old England’,” he credits “The Deserted Village” as a testament written “from direct experience. What we have to inquire into is not, in [this case], historical error, but historical perspective” (The Country 10). This perspective, then, is best gained through analysis.

The poem begins by erecting the pleasant pastoral setting depicted in Blake’s “Introduction to Songs of Innocence” and Landor’s “Shepherd and Nymph.” A lyric voice, characterized by an ambiguous narrator, describes the fictional English village of Auburn:

Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheer’d the labouring swain,
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
And parting summer’s lingering blooms delay’d:

[ll. 1–4]

Goldsmith continues to reinforce the simplicity and felicity of rural life with positive descriptors: “innocence and ease” (l. 5); “pleas[ure]” (l. 6; l. 23); “humble happiness” (l. 8); and “charm” (l. 9). The mention of harsher themes shrinks to brief mentions—much as in Theocritus’ “Idyll VIII”—in which labor appears present, yet idealized: e.g., “When toil remitting lent its turn to play” (l. 16). This is the depiction of rural life which breeds modern ecocritical accusations of fantasy, and which led to historical complaints, such as that of Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), who claimed that pastoralism made apparent that its poets “‘never drove a field, and that they have no flocks to batten’” (qtd. in Heath-Stubbs 70).

Yet this idealized rural life soon takes a sharp turn and inverts the convention of simplicity (Webster, “Oliver”). Goldsmith revisits his positive descriptors with a new contrast:

These were thy charms, sweet village!, sports like these With sweet succession, taught e’en toil to please:
These round thy bowers their cheerful influence shed,
These were thy charms—but all these charms are fled.

[ll. 31–34]

The “Sweet Auburn!” of line 1 and that “charms” of line 9 reemerge with an iambic foot’s stress on the past tense: “were” (l. 31; l. 34). Goldsmith disrupts the trope of pastoral nostalgia, mirrored by the disruption of a medial caesura in line 34, and instead recognizes current rural life as devoid of such merriment (Webster, “Oliver”). This is an inversion of the expectations presented in some poetic examples previously discussed in this chapter, such as in Blake’s “London,” where the lyric voice characterized urban lifestyles with “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (l. 4). Rural life, just as urban life, can “shed” its cheer (l. 33).

The lyric voice does not hesitate to name the party responsible for the desertion of Auburn’s cheer (l. 33). The presence of a wealthy landowner litters the poem through various references: “the tyrant’s hand” (l. 37), “one only master” (l. 39), and “the spoiler’s hand” (l. 49), among many. This mark of luxury is made explicit: “Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.” (ll. 51–52). Though Auburn represents a composite of rural life, its representation of nature under accumulations of wealth illuminates a larger theme. Some scholars insist the microcosm of Goldsmith’s fictional village echoes the macrocosm of rural England at the time. Literary critic Howard J. Bell, Jr. claimed that, “All over the kingdom similar conditions exist[ed]: the men who ha[d] accumulated wealth through commerce [were] grabbing the land, dispossessing the farmer, showing off their unwieldy wealth and cumbrous pomp in their villas, artificial lakes, parks, stables, and hunting preserves” (748–749). The uneven distribution of wealth and resources plaguing all of England left “Sweet Auburn!” a place-holder (l. 1); the name of many real villages could serve as a replacement.

In a sense, Bell describes a fate which, it may be argued, consumed all of nature. On a country-size scale, “The Deserted Village” describes a movement in which the ruling political organization restructured the landscape through a series of laws, specifically the Enclosure Acts. These acts translated to a literal practice of “enclosing” within a walled
or hedged area any land claimed to be owned (O’Donnell 1). Unfortunately, the poorest agricultural laborers lacked the means to erect walls or hedges around farmland they may have worked for generations and, thus, they lost estates to richer prospectors. “The Deserted Village” references this practice in the line, “Those fenceless fields the sons of wealth divide” (l. 307). These enclosures abolished rights over common land (O’Donnell 11), which, by the British Parliamentary estimates, converted some 6.8 million acres of land to monocultures and pastures (“Managing”). Such statistics induce shock, yet they pale in comparison to the statistics presented by ecocritics earlier in this chapter: i.e., land conversion to cultivated systems now equates to “one quarter of Earth’s terrestrial surface” (“Millennium” 2). Of course, all of this divided land is not at the fault of the British Enclosure Acts; but the acts signify a pattern of recurring issues magnified on a global scale: ruling political organizations which sacrifice a diverse rural landscape for monocultures and for megacities.

The issues presented in Goldsmith’s poem may be viewed as the root of the global-scale issue and, thus, able to elucidate some themes of consequence. Yet, interestingly, some extremities of ecocriticism claim that the enormous scope of the current issue invalidates smaller representations. These ecocritics write with a worldview of nature as “dead” (Philippon 395). In this fatalist perspective, Bill McKibben’s The End of Nature (1989) states, “We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (58). This, perhaps, in classic anthropocentric fashion, over-inflates humanity’s significance. However, deconstructing the enormity of the issue into components illustrated by pastoral poetry should suggest to such ecocritics that, through experience with the same problems on a smaller scale, Romantic poets hold insight into prophecies of the modern ecological predicament. Rather than dismissing Goldsmith’s poem as too minor to encompass the contemporary state of, or scale of, urbanization, his poetic tradition should remain within the discourse of ecocritical review to extract wisdom and warning.
These speculations complicate the representation of rural life in “The Deserted Village.” However, the ecocritics’ original argument does not halt at this singular representation: the concepts in question remain the comparison between rural life and urban life, particularly as a diversion “from the city as both a unique environment in its own right and a powerful force affecting other environments” (Philippon 397). With significant reference already devoted to the rural life, the spotlight then moves to a later part of Goldsmith’s poem which first introduces the city. The lyric voice questions the fate of displaced villagers immigrating to cities:

If to the city sped—what waits him there?  
To see profusion that he must not share;  
To see ten thousand baneful arts combin’d  
To pamper luxury, and thin mankind;  
To see those joys the sons of pleasure know  
Extorted from his fellow-creature’s woe.  

[ll. 309–314]

This sad place parallels Blake’s “[m]arks of woe” in the city of his “London” (l. 4). In “The Deserted Village,” the narrator criticizes “luxury” (l. 312), as it is this accumulated wealth which drives landlords’ splintering of the rural landscape (l. 52). Though the poem’s lyric nature attributes this critique to an ambiguous narrator, in his “Preface” to the poem, Goldsmith states that he “inveigh[s] against the encrease of our luxuries” (84). Further, he identifies unchecked “luxuries” as the vice through which “so many kingdoms have been undone” (Goldsmith, “Preface” 85). His personal sentiment weaves throughout the poem. Much as Goldsmith reinforced the simplicity of rural life with positive descriptors, gaudy descriptors reinforce the obsessive luxury of urban life: “glitters” (l. 315); “proud [ . . . ] pomps displayed” (l. 317); “richly deck’d” (l. 318); and “Tumultuous grandeur” (l. 312). By crafting this caricature of the city, it seems that the poem adheres to the “sharp difference [ . . . ] between the rustic and the urban” (Kermode 14).

This “sharp difference” presents a dilemma (ibid). In isolation, ecocritics cannot dismiss Goldsmith’s presentation of the rural life as artifi-
cial. Though some simplicity and idealization characterize the beginning of the piece, the villagers of Auburn, and the land itself, progress to a real suffering. In this fictional account of village desertion, Goldsmith shows, historically, that people and nature can be marginalized at the expense of what governing bodies define as “improvement” (O’Donnell 1). Contemporarily, this may offer insight on solving the same issues which have been left to fester. However, by erecting a comparison to a caricatured urban life, Goldsmith leaves himself vulnerable to the accusation that his work disrespects the ecological value of cities, which the modern ecocritic considers a habitat unto itself (Niemelaä et al. 5).

Such an accusation may be addressed in several ways. The accusation could be deemed valid: by ignoring the potential complexity and beauty within urban life, Goldsmith sacrifices the poem’s ability to act as a vehicle of modern ecocritical thought. This would suggest the poem holds no contemporary ecological value and, thus, should be struck from ecocritical discourse. This, of course, seems an irrational polarization. “‘The Deserted Village’ is avowedly a didactic poem,” and to deny the presence of a useful environmental moral at the indulgence of an all-or-nothing fallacy appears unjustified of any literary criticism (Bell 747). A sounder alternative would be to deem the accusation well-founded but limited in its depreciation of the poem’s ecological worth. Moderate ecocritic Astrid Bracke delineates this line of reasoning: “A more constructive and productive approach than arguing against [the use of the pastoral in ecocriticism] is to replace an evaluative with a diagnostic approach: examine the ways in which these tropes are employed and what this says about human-nature relations [ . . . ]” (435). This idea mirrors arguments previously proposed in this chapter, in that it is counterproductive to measure the value of pastoral poetry according to “a modern order” (Escobar 5). While some modern ecocritics may now recognize urban ecology as a valid, or even as a necessary, presence, in the nature paradigm of the Romantic period, Goldsmith’s representation of the city reflected his value system (Escobar 5). Urbanization embodied a pure devastation (l. 395). The Industrial Revolution was just emerging, and no conception of sustainable technology or “green” cities were yet contemplated (Niemelä et al. 1). The bustling British cityscape did not warrant poetic idealiza-
tion in order to retain value, because cities were not endangered; their
growth was cancerous, and rural lifestyles—victims of the disease—need-
ed poets like Goldsmith to remind the urban readership of the joys, and
the horrors, outside the boundaries of human-made structures. Thus, the
ecological warnings that Goldsmith, and all Romantic poets, crafted still
hold meaning, regardless of constructed comparisons with which some
ecocritical paradigms fundamentally disagree. It is the modern reader’s
philosophical worldview of nature which gauges the extent of, and the
value of, that meaning.

In short, this chapter sought to better understand the claim that the
pastoral is outdated in an era in which the distinction between “urban”
and “nature” blurs. The concepts of “urban” and “rural” were pursued at
a language-level definition and in the context of legal boundaries, noting
how both utilize comparison to clarify meaning. This led to a discussion
of nature as a pluralist concept with multiple principles coexisting, not
competing. Recognizing these shifting worldviews of nature, particularly
in representations of compared rural and urban lifestyles, warranted a
method of tracing such conceptual movements. Pastoral poetry, as a cul-
tural artifact, unearthed the lineage of urbanization to note distinctions
from modern urban ecology, and to highlight resemblances between
ancient ecological plights and modern ones. Examples of the earliest pas-
toral poetry from Theocritus and Virgil supplemented an understanding
of the genre’s roots, including recognition of both similarities and incon-
gruities in modern criticism of pastoralism. Finally, the argument against
the pastoral legacy, and its dependency on erecting comparisons, received
a deeper investigation through poetic analysis of a representative Romani-
tic example in “The Deserted Village.” The chapter’s overall idea, one of
pluralist inclusivity of natural representations, is most accurately reflected
in the words of environmental historian William Cronon: “We need to
embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in
which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper
place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly deni-
grating the other” (377).


---. “London.” Wright, pp. 74–75.


Fairclough, H.R. [translator]. “Eclogues.” Virgil, G.M. Putnam’s Sons,
1916, pp. 1–79.


Webster, Suzanne. Personal Interview. 8 Feb. 2019.
---. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. Oxford University


Works Referenced


While ecocritics identify a plethora of weaknesses in the pastoral genre, this skepticism is not unique to contemporary literary criticism; Pastoralism arises from a legacy of harsh criticism, including within the British Romanic period. In his 1779 work, *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) considered the pastoral a mere “literary exercise” (Kermode 13). According to Johnson, amateur poets used the pastoral as target practice for sharpening true skill: he claimed, “It seems natural for a young poet to initiate himself by Pastorals, which, not professing to imitate real life, require no experience [. . .]” (324). Even literary critics who disagreed with Johnson’s criticism, such as William Lisle Bowles (1762–1850), conceded, “Pastorals do not, in the sense of Dr. Johnson, imitate real life” (62); and the only skill other scholars expected of pastoral poets was “an eye for picturesque and rural scenery, and an intimate acquaintance with those minute objects and particular appeals of nature, which alone can give a lively and original colour to the painting of Pastoral” (Bowles 62). Thus, pastoral poets in the British
Romantic era, when meeting their most stringent of prerequisites, seemed to require only familiarity with nature and artistic license to embellish this familiarity beyond recognition.

The legacy of these literary criticisms runs through modern ecocritical discourse. Ecocritic Astrid Bracke claims that the pastoral “has been primarily understood by ecocritics and other scholars as representing an escapist, idealized image of nature” (435). While the pastoral tradition threads through many literary schools and eras, other ecocritics pinpoint this “blind spot” as inherent in British Romantic pastoralism (Philippon 396). For example, these ecocritics claim that issues in contemporary environmental literature mirror issues stemming from Romantic roots: “Today’s nature writers are forced to overlook the actuality of the landscape we have made for ourselves, so that they can fix their sights on more ideal terrain, which they hope to conquer and settle in spirit” (Phillips 234). These statements borrow Johnson’s language against pastoralism and parallel his accusation that such nature writing overlooks “actuality” and fails to “imitate real life” (324). In short, ecocritics perpetuate an interpretation of the pastoral as an “escapist fantasy” (qtd. in Rigby 156), which not only lacks grounding in reality but also undermines the authors’ abilities to perceive “the actuality of the landscape” (Phillips 234).

These bold accusations, as products of both historical and modern critiques, demand dissection. If literary criticism from the British Romantic era—such as that published by Bowles—claim that the intent of pastoralism is not to imitate real life, and modern ecocritics concur, then the intent must lie elsewhere. Many ecocritics interpret this purpose as a form of escapism. Some critics describe these as pastoral “impulses” and consider their function in the pastoral legacy as twofold: one being “to apply the vision of a golden age to the world of politics and history,” and the other, “to withdraw totally into” that vision (Toliver 42). Earlier, the second chapter of this thesis traced the “vision of a golden age” in pastoralism and addressed its origin as an attempted preservation of historical shepherding practices from displacement by urbanization (Toliver 42). This chapter, instead, will focus within the confines of the British Romantic period to analyze the claim that pastoralism is not constructed from “real life” (Johnson 324). After establishing the muse of British Romantic pastoral-
ism, this chapter will then analyze the claim that such pastoral “impulse” persists in order to fulfill an escapist fantasy (Toliver 42).

To begin, it is difficult to trace the exact motivation for ecocriticism’s critique against the pastoral as an “escapist fantasy.” Though many ecocritics dismiss the pastoral tradition as “an escapist, idealized image of nature,” few invoke actual poetic examples to support this claim (Bracke 435). Perhaps these critics find the escapism and idealization so inherent to the tradition, they do not feel that the claim warrants specific poetic references. Nonetheless, to fully understand this argument, some examples must be utilized. In Johnson’s critique, he specifically attacks the pastoral legacy in “Lycidas” (1638) by John Milton (1608–1674). Some scholars trace the grounds of this attack to the genre itself: “By the late eighteenth century, the [pastoral] genre had become so hackneyed that Samuel Johnson could dismiss Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ just for being a pastoral poem [. . .]” (Graver 45). Although the popularity of pastoralism may have left the genre stale, overuse of conventions does not equate to a sound claim against this literary tradition as indulging in a fantastical representation of nature.

Additionally, “Lycidas” arises from a literary era far preceding British Romanticism, while the scope of this defense remains within the boundaries of 1770–1835. Fortunately, similar critiques of this legacy surface within British Romantic poetry. As an illustration, George Crabbe criticized pastoralism’s idealization of the country—particularly of rural laborers—in the first book of The Village (1783). His narrator says, “Muses sing of happy swains, / Because the Muses never knew their pains” (ll. 21–22). Crabbe’s belief that the Muses of pastoralism arise from an ignorance of or inexperience with the realities of rural life support ecocriticism’s claim that the pastoral fails to imitate actuality. Further, Chapter Two of this thesis explored the same idealization of rural labor in “The Deserted Village” (1770) by Oliver Goldsmith. Neither poetic example touches on solely “unrealistic” representations of the landscape; yet both examples reference a deviation from ecological reality through an arguably unrealistic representation of the people closest to the land. In short, if ecocritics were inclined to cite poetry to support their claims, there exist poetic examples from which to draw evidence.

Likewise, there exist many examples of British Romantic pastoralism
which deviate from this pattern. Contrary to Johnson’s first claim that the pastoral makes no attempt at “imitat[ing] real life,” this poetry, at times, finds roots in true ecological events (324). Specifically, this defense will analyze two examples of such poetry. While two poems alone cannot represent the entirety of a literary genre, these examples hope to offer evidence that “real life” inspired enough pastoral poems to warrant pastoralism’s inclusion in ecocritical discourse. These particular examples arise from Jonathan Bate’s *Green Romanticism* (1996), in which he references a global-scale natural disaster acting as a muse for at least two Romantic poets.

In April of 1815, the eruption of Mount Tambora devastated the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, an event now regarded as the largest known historical eruption (Veale and Endfield 318). Such a catastrophe held climatic repercussions for the entire Earth, a phenomenon now understood by modern scientists as an effect of atmospheric circulation (Christopherson 131). By the following year, the effects of such a natural disaster could not pretend to be localized. England’s summer of 1816—often referred to as “The Year Without a Summer”—constitutes one of the most “unseasonable on record” (Veale and Endfield 319) with “abundant evidence for extreme weather” conditions (Oppenheimer 244). Modern scientists still draw from Romantic authors to understand the environmental context of this summer in Europe. Academic journal articles from the Geography departments of the University of Nottingham and the University of Cambridge directly reference Romantic writers: “the writing of Mary Shelley and Lord Byron has been used to provide insight into [the] summer [of] 1816” (Veale and Endfield 320), and “[t]he summer of 1816 was also miserable, reflected in Lord Byron’s poem, *Darkness* [. . .]” (Oppenheimer 250). Not only did Romantic authors write on environmental events occurring in “real life” (Johnson 324), but their insight into these events shapes modern scientific discourse and warrants quotation by both historical geographers and environmental historians.

Analyzing the quoted works directly elucidates Romantic poetry’s roots in realistic environmental conditions. George Gordon Byron wrote his poem “Darkness” in July of 1816, “the coldest July within the Central England Temperature series (extending back to 1659)” (Veale and Endfield 319). The poem begins with the line, “I had a dream, which was not
all a dream” (l. 1). From the beginning of the text, Byron suggests that the subject of his poem originates in reality, not imagination. The poem references England’s lack of sunlight and the unseasonable cold: “The bright sun was extinguish’d” (l. 2) leaving an “icy earth” (l. 4) in which “all hearts / Were chill’d into a selfish prayer for light” (ll. 8–9). Moreover, the poem continues on to explicitly reference volcanic activity:

Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish’d with a crash—and all was black.
[ll. 19–21]

Byron mirrors the disruption of the weather through disruption of meter in lines 19 and 21, and through the medial caesuras in lines 19, 20, and 21. Further, the repetition of the term “extinguish’d” in lines 2 and 21 emphasizes the blackened state of the English summer sky in which circulating volcanic particles truly appeared to smother the sun. From the poem’s onset, details of Byron’s apocalyptic setting stem from inspiration found in his own environment.

Byron’s ability to recreate this environmental setting in poetry may be dismissed as William Lisle Bowles’ suggestion that pastoral poets need only “an intimate acquaintance” with nature to “give a lively and original colour to the painting of Pastoral” (62). However, more so than describing the state of England’s environment in 1816, “Darkness” predicts the cultural ramifications of this ecological destruction. The fluctuating weather wreaked havoc on agricultural practices; the year culminated with one of the least prosperous harvests in memory, followed by a sudden rise in the price of both European and American grain (Veale and Endfield 325). Famine led to social unrest, and this theme of restless hunger threads throughout the poem (Oppenheimer 256). Specifically, Byron repeats the terms “famine” and “famish’d”: for example, “and the pang / Of famine fed upon all entrails—men / Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh” (ll. 43–45); “famish’d men” (l. 49); “The crowd was famish’d by de-
degrees” (l. 55); and “Unknowing who he was upon whose brow / Famine
had written Fiend [. . .]” (ll. 68–69). Overall, the poem touches on social
concerns which arise from environmental causes.

Significantly, Byron appears able to attribute this process of com-
pounding environmental consequence to a prototypical understanding of
the ecological cycle in a model of a sustainable society. Some contemporary
environmental philosophers use the Three Pillar Model to define sustain-
ability, in which economy, ecology, and equity are isolated components
(or “pillars”) which support the burden of a sustainable society (Poole).
When one of these variables shifts, the entire model crumbles. Towards
the end of “Darkness,” Byron references the interconnectedness of climat-
ic events with societal-level consequence: “[. . .] The world was void, / The
populous and the powerful was a lump, / Seasonless, herbless, treeless,
manless, lifeless—” (ll. 69–71). In line 71, the rolling list of mounting de-
scriptors, intensified by an extra syllable in the iambic pentameter, reflect
the mounting environmental outcomes. First, the world loses seasonality,
as England lost the summer of 1816. The loss of seasons leads to the loss
of vegetation, rendering the barren landscape “herbless [and] treeless” (l.
71). This also references the loss of crops, which disrupts the sustainable
pillar of “economy.” Finally, the failure of agricultural systems culminates
in the starvation of humans and, ultimately, life. Thus, “Darkness” exceeds
an imitation of “real life” (Johnson 324) and an “eye for picturesque and
rural scenery” (Bowles 62). This Romantic poet details a complex cycle of
environmental reaction beyond surface-level observation.

While “Darkness” represents a Romantic poem grounded in environ-
mental and societal reality, ecocritics could argue that the poem fits the
category of a nature poem better than that of a pastoral. “Darkness” makes
specific reference to rural life, describing the destruction of rustic homes:
“the huts, / The habitations of all things which dwell, / Were burnt for
beacons” (ll. 11–13). Yet “Darkness” erases the presence of a pre-apoca-
lyptic life. The implication of a happier time remains; however, without
details of the time before “men forgot their passions in the dread / Of this
their desolation,” the poem lacks the common tropes of pastoralism (ll.
7–8). Indeed, the poem offers more references to urban life: “cities were
consumed” (l. 13) and “but two / Of an enormous city did survive” (ll.
Correspondingly, the mark of pastoralism may not be strong enough in this particular poem to convince all ecocritics of the sub-genre’s merit.

However, Byron did not monopolize the poetry on England’s unusual weather patterns. As Mt. Tambora “continued rumbling intermittently at least up to August 1819,” John Keats crafted his poem, “To Autumn” (1819), as a reaction to alleviating environmental conditions (Oppenheimer 241). This poem represents a clear example of British Romantic pastoralism. In The Poetical Works of John Keats (1884), notes written by Francis Palgrave (1824–1897) compare the piece to works by the originator of pastoralism, Theocritus (?–260 B.C.E.): “Another masterpiece: [. . .] it is such as a Theocritus might have longed to write.” The evidence of pastoral influence extends beyond merely the subject of nature; Keats includes pastoral tropes of the rural countryside, including piping references to “songs of Spring” (l. 23) and autumn’s “music” (l. 24). While “To Autumn” lacks a shepherd figure, the poem retains imprints of shepherding life; for example, the poem includes the sound of lambs: “And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn” (l. 30). Thus, “To Autumn” represents an explicit example of the pastoral legacy in British Romantic poetry.

Accepted as a poem deeply influenced by pastoral tradition, “To Autumn” constitutes a representative example of ecologically-grounded pastoralism. In fact, this poem is “perhaps the sole poem [by Keats] to have been discussed at any length in an ecocritical context” (Henning 408): some ecocritics would even venture to categorize the piece as a “canonical text” (Bate 42). Regardless, ecocriticism’s devotion of resources to this particular poem warrants investigation; and such an investigation unearths a likeness to “Darkness.” In contrast with Byron’s lament of an “extinguish’d” sun (l. 2) rendering the Earth “Seasonless” (l. 71), Keats opens “To Autumn” with the image of seasonality and sunshine:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;

[ll. 1–4]
The poem celebrates both the individual “Season” of autumn and the cycle of all seasons (l. 1). Literary scholars note this cyclic motion, intensified by the enjambment (Webster, Personal): Jonathan Bate states, “Keats’s ode ‘To Autumn’ is predicated upon the certainty of the following spring’s return; the poem will look very different if there is soon an autumn when ‘gathering swallows twitter in the skies’ for the last time” (2). Also, Keats mirrors Byron’s understanding of the ecological driver of this seasonality and of the cycle of life: the “maturing sun” (l. 2) alone grants access to agricultural “bless[ing]” (l. 3). In essence, Keats’s pastoral shows the same evidence of Byron’s inspiration from true environmental contexts and ecological cycles.

However, ecocritics can exaggerate agricultural “bless[ing]” into a representation of fantastical excess (l. 3). “To Autumn” continues in a manner opposing the restless hunger in “Darkness” and emphasizes—or, as ecocritics might claim, overemphasizes—a prosperous warmth: trees “bend with apples” (l. 5), fruit “fills [. . .] with ripeness to the core” (l. 6), the gourd “swell[s]” (l. 7), and the hazel shells grow “plump [. . .] / With a sweet kernel” (ll. 7–8). The verbs of the poem burst with bounty, a sharp contrast to Byron’s repeated terms of “famine” and “famish’d.” Keats’s representation of autumn overflows with life; ecocritics seem to misinterpret this as an idealization of the harvest and, thus, a product of artifice. Such “poetics of excess” warrant disapproval from ecocriticism; in fact, some scholars cite this thread of surplus as justification for Keats’s historic disqualification “in terms of critical ecological reflection” (Henning 408).

Yet, this emergence of bounty in Keats’s poem coincidences with the return of England’s stable weather in 1819. For the first time in three years, England experienced a pleasant summer, which culminated in a healthy harvest. While ecocritics may misconstrue the contrast between “Darkness” and “To Autumn” as a polarization, with neither poem reflective of actuality, the poetry embodies the climactic transition from an extremity back to an average. When juxtaposed, Keats’s representation of an average autumn appears more delightful than expected in “real life” (Johnson 324), because the autumn of 1819 was more delightful relative to most experienced that decade. Thus, Keats did not craft the undercurrent of excess from pastoral artifice or idealization: “To Autumn” was
a genuine “spontaneous overflow of his powerful feelings evoked by the serene beauty in autumn” (Robertson 68). With attention to the environmental context of the poem, the plentiful harvest becomes an appropriate representation, not a caricature of pastoral “impulse” (Toliver 42). To conclude, ecocriticism’s first claim that pastoralism created entirely fabricated environments, tethered to fantasy over actuality, appears hastily surmised.

This conclusion leads to ecocriticism’s speculation about the second form of pastoral “impulse”: representing an idealized rural environment as a means of escape (Toliver 42). In truth, constructing a representation of nature characterized by excess—even when reflective of real environments—constitutes only one of multiple pastoral tropes in “To Autumn.” More so than nature being unrealistically bountiful, ecocritics may claim that “To Autumn” carries the pastoral legacy of omitting “the harsher aspects” of rural life (Heath-Stubbs 3). In Keats’s poem, the second stanza personifies Autumn as various forms of agricultural work (Webster, Personal):

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep,
Drows’d with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Sparès the next swath and all its twined flowers:
[ll. 12–18]

The fantastical element of this poem, then, may not reside in an unrealistic representation of nature but of the agricultural laborer. Especially in years of tremendous harvest, laborers toiled from dawn to dusk. Rarely, if ever, would a farmer in the midst of the harvest sit “careless on a granary floor” (l. 14), or, worse, sleep atop a “half-reap’d furrow” (l. 16). Particularly, the addition of the descriptor “half-reap’d” suggests that laborers left work unpertformed, its completion a victim of sloth (l. 16). Ecocritics may point to this portrayal as evidence that pastoralism warps the image of “real [rural] life” (Johnson 324).
Ecocritics would argue that the danger of this depiction lies in perpetuating a stereotype of an idealized or simplified rural lifestyle. Such a danger may be well founded. In 2011, modern British sociologists conducted surveys on non-rural dwellers’ perception of rural life in Cornwall and Northumberland; many participants still perceived rural areas “through the lens of the idyllic countryside, which can mask poverty, hardship and deprivation” (Bosworth and Willett 196). Markedly, these perceptions lead rural life to become synonymous “with attractive characteristics such as a slower pace of life, quietness, picturesque countryside and an escape from the less attractive aspects of modernity” (Bosworth and Willett 209; emphasis added). Interestingly, modern sociologists express this trend in language nearly identical to ecocritical critique that the pastoral erects an idealized landscape which functions as a “refuge from modernity” (Philippon 397).

Within this stereotype lies the second legacy of the pastoral impulse, one that ecocritics describe merely as “escapist” (Bracke 435). The exact articulation of this escapism can be ambiguous. Modern sociologists call this impulse “an escape from the less attractive aspects of modernity,” yet leave these “less attractive aspects” unnamed (Bosworth and Willett 209). Early scholars of the pastoral, such as Renato Poggioli (1907–1963), interpreted these “less attractive aspects of modernity” as “obligations” (Bosworth and Willett 209) and believed the pastoral legacy perpetuates an “escape from commitment and responsibility” (Hardin viii). This criticism could apply to select pastoral poems, such as the idealized labor in “To Autumn” in which the endless provision of nature does not require the sweat of humankind.

Yet ecocritics’ interpretation of pastoralism as an escape from the responsibilities inherent to modernization does not fit other British Romantic representations of rural life. In particular, Wordsworth’s representations of rural laborers imitate the “hard-working shepherds he knew from his boyhood in the English Lake District” (Graver 46). In his poem “The Idle Shepherd-Boys” (1800), the singing contests of ancient pastorals appear as a “childish game that keeps two shepherd lads from attending to their duty” (Graver 46). This poem does not praise a lack of attention though; rather, the poem cautions that neglect of duty allows a lamb to “[slip]
into the stream” (l. 67). This didactic poem concludes with a cautionary message: “And gently did the Bard / Those idle Shepherd-Boys upbraid, / And bade them better mind their trade” (ll. 97–99). The shepherding trade demands a vigilance, and Wordsworth highlights the consequences of shirking this commitment in favor of idle pastimes. Thus, Wordsworth’s pastoral cannot function as a refuge from accountability.

Further, in Book VIII of *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth references the pastoral tendency to idealize shepherding hardships as an escape from “commitment and responsibility” and inverts this tendency (Hardin viii). Wordsworth claims that the realities for “us toiling in this late day” (l. 133) are removed from the “Felicity, in Grecian song renowned” (l. 135) and the poems “such as Spenser fabled” (l. 144). The speaker concedes, “True it is, / That I had heard (what [Spenser] perhaps had seen)” (ll. 144–145), referring to the mirth of rural lifestyles—including “song[s] of taunting rhymes” (l. 148) and “Tales of the May-pole dance” (l. 151); yet, he balances this merriment with detriment:

[…]

And the rural ways
And manners which my childhood looked upon
Were the luxuriant produce of a life
Intent on little but substantial needs,
Yet rich in beauty, beauty that was felt.
But images of danger and distress,
Man suffering among awful Powers and Forms;
Of this I heard, and saw enough to make
Imagination restless; [...]

[ll. 159–167]

Rather than offering an escape from the “commitment and responsibility” of modernity (Hardin viii), Wordsworth’s modern shepherd commits to a subsistence-based lifestyle both “rich in beauty” and in “suffering” (ll. 163–165). Wordsworth harmonizes this tension between idealized pastoralism and actuality:
In essence, Wordsworth does not recognize pastoralism as a childish “Fancy” in which a wild “pastoral tract” allows the reader to escape into some long-lost Eden (ll. 186–187); rather, the pastoral legacy keeps alive a lifestyle in which actual shepherds must work harder to compensate for “less generous” fortunes (l. 188). With attention to the pastoral legacy, British Romantic poets can re-sculpt ecocritics’ concerns of escapism into a “starkly realistic portrait of rural life” (Graver 46).

Thus, ecocriticism’s argument that British Romantic writers used idealized environments in pastoral poetry as an “escape from the less attractive aspects of modernity” must include a more nuanced interpretation (Bosworth and Willett 209). Though some older scholars of the pastoral named “obligation” as one of these “less attractive aspects,” examples from one British Romantic poet alone caution that shepherding lifestyles are no enticing escape from responsibility. Neglecting duties in rural life bred dire consequences, and even attentive devotion to these duties still often led to “danger,” “distress,” and “suffering” through no fault of the laborer (ll. 164–165). If modern ecocritics claim that British Romantic pastoralism creates a false cornucopia of nature as a “refuge from modernity,” then these critics must invoke a new definition of modernity and its less tantalizing features (Philippon 397).

The difficulty in understanding—and, thus, refuting—this claim lies in untangling ecocritics’ meaning of “modernity” (Philippon 397). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines modernity as “an intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs (chiefly those of scientific rationalism and liberalism)” (“modernization, n.”). This is a dense definition which requires further elucidation. In particular, this definition categorizes “modernity” as a process perpetuated by two motivations: “an intellectual
tendency” or a “social perspective” (“modernity, n.”). Since ecocritics do not explicitly accuse Romantic poets of rejecting or of lacking a particular driver of “modernity,” each driver must be considered separately.

First, it would seem unreasonable to imply that Romantic writers constructed poetic sanctuaries from modernization because these authors lacked “an intellectual tendency” towards “scientific rationalism and liberalism” (“modernity, n.”). Romantic authors were well versed in the science and exploration of their era (Fulford, et al. 24). Not least, the two poets discussed within this chapter held familiarity with various branches of the sciences. Byron incorporated astronomy—specifically the discovery of Uranus in 1781—into his dramatic work, *Cain* (1821), with a description of other worlds:

> Shapes
> Unequal, of deep valleys and vast mountains;
> And some emitting sparks, and some displaying
> Enormous liquid plains […]
> [II.i.184–187]

Further, Keats trained as a surgeon, suggesting an intimate understanding of biology, anatomy, and medicine (Fulford 97). Other major Romantic authors continue this pattern. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote of his deep engagement with scientific discourse as early as 1797: “I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine—then the *Mind of man*—then the *minds of men*—in all Travels, Voyages and Histories” (qtd. in Fulford 97). Also, in his time at Oxford, Percy Bysshe Shelley dabbled in chemistry and electricity; Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1851) crafted *Frankenstein* (1818) from the electrical discoveries of the Italian scientist, Luigi Galvani (1737–1798); and William Wordsworth reflected the “natural philosophy” of Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) in his poetry (Nichols xix). Thus, ecocritics cannot accuse Romantic writers of erecting a refuge from modernity because of an absence of “scientific rationalism” (“modernity, n.”).

Though Romantic writers were involved with the science of their time,
ecocritics could claim this personal investment did not appear in their written work. However, this claim was already proven untrue for Byron, supported by his incorporation of astronomic discoveries in *Cain*. Moreover, this claim is untrue within pastoral poetry. For example, scholars note that the language of “To Autumn” mirrors scientific discourse of the era. Keats describes the sound of gnats in lines 27 to 29: “Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn / Among the river-sallows, borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies.” Literary critic Ashton Nichols notes that this language echoes the 1817 writings of two renowned British entomologists, William Kirby (1759–1850) and Williams Spence (1783–1860): “tribes of *Tipulidae* (usually, but improperly called gnats) assemble [. . .] and form themselves into choirs, that alternately rise and fall [. . .] These little creatures may be seen at all seasons, amusing themselves with their choral dances” (qtd. 97). The repetition of the same metaphorical “choir” and the same distinct motion of “sinking” or “fall[ing]” may be a product of coincidence; yet such a defense is tenuous at best. In short, ecocritics cannot support a solid claim that Romantic writers lacked “an intellectual tendency” towards “scientific rationalism,” nor that this tendency failed to emerge in their pastoral poetry (“modernity, n.”).

Clearly, scientific rationalism influenced Romantic authors, and this influence appeared in pastoral poetry. Thus, there is little evidence to suggest that these writers rejected the process of modernization either through a lack of intellectually driven, scientific grounding, or through failure to represent this perspective in poetic works. However, ecocritics may propose a final variation of a deficiency in “intellectual tendency” which results in escapism: Romantic authors’ scientific rationalism, though present in personal conviction and poetic execution, was overshadowed by sentimentalism. For example, while “To Autumn” borrows language from entomologists of the era, Keats’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—an overarching descriptor of British Romantic poetry first found in Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)—may obscure scientific realism, and venture into an escapist fantasy (Robertson 68). This nuanced accusation may be the root of ecocritical dissatisfaction.

Yet such an argument suggests that “rational” and “emotional” are antonyms, with objectivity at the forefront of intellect and at the opposing
end of sensitivity. This false dichotomy seems a revitalization of antiquated hierarchies of knowledge, such as the Great Chain of Being, in which rational creatures hold higher significance than emotional creatures (Nichols 15). Ecofeminism—a subcategory of ecocriticism sometimes called “feminist ecocriticism”—criticizes this same logic as perpetuating dismissal of women’s objectivity because of their traditionally deep, emotional connection to the Earth (Kerridge 366). In the same vein, to suggest that Romantic authors’ emotionally charged representations of nature disqualify this poetry from conveying a rational message against modernization, erects an unfounded dualism. Truthfully, internalizing an environmental ethic, and a moral obligation to sustainability, admits an emotional attachment to the Earth. British Romantic poets were unashamed of this attachment: for one, Wordsworth, in Book VIII of *The Prelude*, claims that “With deep devotion, Nature, did I feel” (l. 70). Some modern ecofeminists would argue that “we cannot even begin to talk about the issue of ethics unless we admit that we care (or feel something)” —in this instance, to feel something for the Earth (qtd. in King 75). Further, these theorists now claim that “the most important intellectual step that environmentalists [need] to take” involves resolving “reason/nature dualisms that split mind from body, reason from emotion” (qtd. in Kerridge 366). In other words, an emotionally charged argument is not inherently unreasonable; rather, the first step of crafting a philosophical argument involves *admission* of feeling. In this manner, the pastoral “makes claims to emotional, local, and social realism, even while presenting a national ideal. Consequently, we miss some of the genre’s complexity if we dismiss it too quickly as escapist fantasy or mere ideological mystification” (Westover 78). In summary, no variation of interpreting ecocriticism’s critique that the pastoral is an “escapist fantasy” (qtd. in Rigby 156) which functions as a “refuge from modernity” (Philippon 397) can originate from British Romantic poets harboring an inadequate intellectual tendency—the first defined “driver” of modernity.

This conclusion, then, leads to the second driver of modernity: a “social perspective” (“modernity, n.”). Ultimately, ecocritics seem to accuse British Romantic pastoralism of perpetuating a sociological perspective contrary to modernization as an attempt to escape it. In this accusation, ec-
ocritics invoke the modernization theory—a sociological concept “which proposes that all societies necessarily evolve from a simple to a complex structure and towards a goal of industrialization” (“modernization, n.”). By praising the simplistic rural countryside, Romantic writers reject this societal evolution. Ecocritics interpret this rejection as a refusal to accept the actuality of the British landscape and as a nostalgic regression towards obsolete, pre-industrialized values.

This line of reasoning presents several faults in logic. First, this perspective of modernization integrates the underlying acceptance of industrialization as a “goal” (“modernization, n.”). Yet treating industrialization as an achievement is a localized value of Western capitalistic societies, one which often projects itself on traditional or agrarian cultures. The imposition of this idea equates complexity to advancement, creating a “magical identity” in which “development = modernisation = Westernisation” (Shiva 135). This form of economics, often known as classical Capitalist economics, arose in the beginning of the British Romantic period. In 1776, the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) published his landmark text, *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he argued that “the wealth of a nation is essentially the annual product of its labor […]” (qtd. in Caradonna 47). He also “lauds the importance of growth [and] the necessity of a strict division of labor [… .]” (ibid). This included economic growth at the expense of environmental integrity and social equity, rupturing the Three Pillar Model of a sustainable society that is suggested in Byron’s “Darkness.” However, Smith’s influential description of a deregulated free market found roots in a specific theory of social progress: at the time, a popular sociological theory in Scotland believed that “human civilization advanced along with new economic systems. Thus, Smith associated capitalism with moral progress […]” (Caradonna 47). Such an economic model values production as the ultimate indicator of overall societal progress; thus, economic metrics become the standards of modernization and, in turn, the standards of a “successful” society. In essence, ecocritics argue that the particular concept of progress which Smith promoted is the modernity that British Romantic poets attempted to escape through idealized pastoral landscapes.

However, Smith’s societal model, and its value system, is not universal.
British Romantic poets did not merely elude capitalistic economics; these writers promoted a divergent, highly structured value system: a *traditional* value system. The term “traditional” often invokes “the 19th-century attitudes of simple, savage and static” rural cultures (Berkes, *et al.* 1251). While ecocritics may accuse British Romantic poets of this simplistic representation of agricultural laborers, the knowledge system of these rural peoples harbors an inherent intricacy. Traditional knowledge is both holistic and adaptive, “gathered over generations by observers whose lives depended on this information and its use. It often accumulates incrementally, tested by trial-and-error and transmitted to future generations orally or by shared practical experiences” (Berkes, *et al.* 1252). This includes broader knowledge of crop rotations and of plants’ medicinal value, but also includes highly localized knowledge of preferred grazing locations, of soils particularly suited for crop species, and of planning strategies for next year’s harvest. Thus, a rural laborer’s knowledge of his land, and the values which arise from this knowledge, are as sophisticated and valid as any economic system detailed in the essays of moral philosophers.

British Romantic poetry offers many examples of these traditional, local knowledge systems. For example, the measure of prosperity in “To Autumn” does not include the price of grain nor the profit margin for the laborer; the “ripeness” of fruits (l. 6) and the “sweet[ness]” of hazel shells (l. 8) are metrics of a successful harvest. Similarly, in Book VIII of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reveals the luxuries “of a life / Intent on little but substantial needs” (ll. 161–162). In classical Capitalistic societies, such a phrase appears oxymoronic. Wealth equates to excess production; a farmer who produces merely to live, not to profit, fails to meet Smith’s interpretation of a luxurious life (Caradonna 47). Yet both Keats and Wordsworth construct a pastoral landscape of bounty unattached to material wealth because subsistence farming—unlike commercial farming—instills a value system in which the simple provision of the land achieves the ultimate goal of survival. The measure of success in such a society is producing enough for a family to survive upon until the next harvest, and to convey practices learned during this harvest, to the next (Berkes, *et al.* 1252).

This value system also appears in variations of the British Romantic pastoral. For example, Wordsworth’s interpretation of the pastoral elegy
recognizes the knowledge and value systems of a rural laborer as intertwined with his lands (Graver 46). In “The Brothers, a Pastoral Poem” (1800)—a poem which Coleridge hailed as “that model of English pastoral” (qtd. in Graver 46)—the conversation between two speakers reveals that a rural boy of just “twelve years old” (l. 304) already finds “His soul was knit to this[,] his native soil” (l. 305). This connectivity of rural cultures to their land arises from a traditional knowledge-system that requires intimacy with the local environment. Further, this system functions as an accumulation of knowledge “gathered over generations” (Berkes, et al. 1252). Wordsworth directly references this generational connection to landscapes through a fictional rural laborer named Walter Ewbank (l. 203):

For five long generations had the heart
Of Walter’s forefathers o’erflow’d the bounds
Of their inheritance, that single cottage,
You see it yonder, and those few green fields.
They toil’d and wrought, and still, from sire to son,
Each struggled, and each yielded as before
A little—yet a little—[…]

[ll. 207–213]

Again, reading this poem through ecocritics’ modern Capitalistic lens would find this description oxymoronic. Wordsworth describes a “single cottage” (l. 209) upon which five generations of men “toil’d and wrought” and “struggled” (ll. 211, 212) only to yield a “little” (l. 213). And “yet a little” (l. 213) is equated to an “o’erflow’d [. . .] inheritance” (ll. 208–209). The British Romantic pastoral does not pretend to escape the “less attractive aspects of modernity” through an escape from commitment, responsibility, or hardship (Bosworth and Willett 209). Instead, these writers escape a particular sociological ideology which defines prosperity through a Capitalistic value-system centered around production.

While some ecocritics may concede that localized value-systems discredit industrialization as a “goal” of modernity, the second fault in this ideology is considering industrialization as inevitable. Ecocritics have
the benefit of knowing the 250 years of global economic history during which industrialization became the dominant ideology; therefore, eco-critics claim the futility of British Romantic ideologies based on the erosion of these rural value systems in the centuries after the period ended (Caradonna 46). In this manner, adhering to a modernization theory in which all societies necessarily evolve “towards a goal of industrialization” is a product of hindsight bias (“modernization, n.”). This logical fallacy is the common tendency to perceive an outcome as having been obviously predictable before the outcome occurred. In this instance, ecocritics claim that British Romantic authors cling to pastoral idealization as an attempt to escape the fate of the modernity which eventually occurred; however, British Romantic writers had no possible means of considering this societal evolution as determined.

Modern British culture still offers examples of this hindsight bias. In a previously mentioned 2011 study—in which modern British sociologists found that current perceptions of rural life masked “poverty, hardship and deprivation” (Bosworth and Willett 196)—participants also associated rural traditions “with a sense of backwardness, especially from a business perspective” (209; emphasis added). This is a reiteration of the Capitalistic economic value system. Since the few rural traditions which managed to survive since the British Romantic period do not place the same emphasis on monetary wealth, England’s “modernity” views this as a failed business model rather than a conscious deviation in values. Yet, in the British Romantic era, rural life was the dominant business model. Nearly forty years after the end of the British Romantic period, in 1871, “farm labouring was still by far the largest male occupation, and persons employed in agriculture were as numerous as the three ‘leading sectors’ of the Industrial Revolution—textiles, transport, and mining—put together” (qtd. in Sharoni 11). Ecocritics may now look back on the collapse of British agrarian culture as inescapable; but British Romantic poets had no conception of this, even by the end of their generation. Thus, ecocritics cannot hope to judge the value of British Romantic pastoralism, nor consider this an extension of escapism, based on a dominant Capitalistic ideology which did not yet exist.

In summary, ecocritics oftentimes construct a claim that the pastoral
represents “an escapist, idealized image of nature” based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the value system which propagated this genre during the British Romantic period (Bracke 435). Much of this era’s pastoralism found roots in realistic environmental conditions. Byron and Keats wrote pastoral poems inspired by true ecological events, and Wordsworth found inspiration in the shepherds and rural laborers of his youth. In this way, British Romantic writers did not “overlook the actuality of the landscape” (Phillips 234), nor did they fail to “imitate real life” (Johnson 324). Rather, the actuality of rural value-systems prompted these writers to criticize an economic model—a model that ecocritics equate to “modernity”—that undermined the integrity of rural cultures and the integrity of the environment.

British Romantic poets were a group of forward-thinking, intellectual individuals, well-versed in science, exploration, and technology, who sought to escape a particular pathway of modernization paved in Capitalistic ideals. These authors used pastoral poetry as one method of dispersing a reasonable argument against one interpretation of “advancement”; their emotional attachment to the land, and to the displaced peoples of that land did not trivialize the significance of their criticism. Moreover, these writers did not cling to a primitive lifestyle out of ignorance of the prospective “wealth” in a Free Market society: instead, these authors “realized that a deregulated, growth-oriented economy brought potentially negative consequences for society, the economy, and the environment. [Thus, these] critics should be remembered as part of the history of sustainability” (Caradonna 46).

This conclusion, of course, begs the question as to the vision of modernization to which British Romantic pastoralism did subscribe. Ecocritics could readily dismantle British Romanticism’s rejection of a Capitalist modernity as also discarding valuable entities which vastly improved the quality of life. Rejecting some of these advancements may have resulted in inconveniences, such as slower production rates when favoring the handloom over the power loom, or the hand plow over the tractor (not invented until 1892). Yet ecocritics inflate this line of reasoning to more critical modern triumphs, such as advancements over disease. Admittedly, though the rural cultures represented in British Romantic pastoralism involved
complex mechanisms of accumulating ecological knowledge, it cannot be assumed that these societies would reach the same level of technological advancement as those societies with excess resources devoted to scientific exploration. While the implication behind such progress includes complicated ethical questions that this thesis does not seek to address, some pastoral poetry attempts to bridge this tension between traditional rural life and select aspects of modernization. Analyzing, in detail, a single poem from this period hopes to elucidate one variation of British Romanticism’s preferred path of modernization—one contradicting “industrial modernity” (Caradonna 56).

“Good Tidings: Or, News from the Farm, a Poem” (1804), by Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823), offers a representative example of pastoral poetry that supports the introduction of modern technology—specifically Edward Jenner’s (1749–1823) introduction of the smallpox vaccination to England in 1796—without undermining rural value-systems (Behbehani 456). While one poem cannot pretend to represent the entirety of a literary sub-genre, this poem functions well as a template for analysis due to the directness of its pastoral lineage. As a poet, Bloomfield was a self-proclaimed “writer of Pastoral poetry, and literally a Cow-boy” (Fulford, et al. 212). His contemporaries endorsed this proclamation: Robert Southey termed him one of England’s “uneducated” poets, “a term of praise meant to reflect his unadulterated rural genius” (Branch). Thus, Bloomfield’s poetry represents a clear example of British Romantic pastoralism.

Further, Bloomfield preemptively defended his poem from accusations of fantasy. In the original “Advertisement” preceding the poem, Bloomfield claims that his work originates from personal “anecdote.” His father died of smallpox during his infancy, and his brother’s child also died of the disease while Bloomfield penned the poem (Branch). Bloomfield makes direct references to these tragedies in the “Advertisement”: “The account given of my infancy and of my father’s burial is not only poetically, but strictly true, and with me it has its weight accordingly. I have witnessed the destruction described in my brother’s family [. . .].” Modern literary critics support this autobiographical element, claiming that the poem “combines a number of different poetic modes including the narrative verse tale, the autobiographical lyric, the pastoral lyric and the didactic
propaganda poem” (White 141). Further, the poem uses true historical accounts of the discoveries against smallpox; for example, Bloomfield references Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) in line 99, crediting Montagu for bringing “back variolation from Constantinople in 1721” (White 142; Webster, “Mary”). In short, through personal and historical anecdotes, this pastoral poem preserves itself from ecocritical dismissal as overlooking “actuality” (Phillips 234) or “real life” (Johnson 324).

Finally, the “Advertisement” addresses the concern of dichotomizing reason and emotion. Bloomfield makes no pretense of his intentions with the poem; his work proudly promotes smallpox vaccination. His argument first originates through pathos: he claims to have “insured the lives of [his own] four children by Vaccine Inoculation, who, I trust, are destined to look back upon the Small-pox as the scourge of days gone by. My hopes are high, and my prayers sincere for its universal adoption” (Bloomfield). His personal conviction, deeply rooted in both familial loss and a desire to protect his remaining kin, shows evidence of emotional influence. Bloomfield is careful to admit that, while his emotional attachment to the subject “may escape the appearance of affectation of research, or a scientific treatment of the subject,” his research arises from scientific notations in “Woodville on Inoculation” (Bloomfield). This is most likely a reference to the first volume of *History of Inoculation* (1799) by the physician William Woodville (1752–1805), a specialist in cowpox and smallpox (McVail 1271). Thus, both pastoral tradition and Romantic sentimentality influence “Good Tidings,” yet the poem still retains an image of “real life” events and conveys a message steeped in scientific rationalism (Johnson 324). Overall, the poem represents a model illustration of arguments addressed within this chapter.

Having presented the reasoning behind this choice of poem, analysis of it, now, hopes to offer themes common to thinkers and writers of the British Romantic era. To begin, the poem opens with an embodiment of the devastation of smallpox. The figure of a “Blind Child, so lovely and so fair” (l. 1) attempts to play with other country children. Bloomfield accentuates the child’s symbolic innocence, describing his “guileless dimples” (l. 2), his “jovial cry” (l. 9), and “the native gladness of his heart” (l. 16). Indeed, the poem’s speaker emphasizes that this boy is “A very child
in every thing but sight” (l. 12). Within forty lines, the poem takes a sharp turn when the poetic voice turns to speak to the Blind Child’s mother: “When was this work of bitterness begun? / How came the blindness of your only son?” (ll. 41–42). The mother, with a “tear that trembles in her eye” (l. 45), details his infection:

“Sickness ensu’d—in terror and dismay
“I nurs’d him in my arms both night and day,
[…]  
“Alone I sat; the thought still sooths my heart,
“That surely I perform’d a mother’s part,
“Watching with such anxiety and pain
“Till he might smile and look on me again;
“But that was not to be—ask me no more:
“GOD keep small-pox and blindness from your door!”
[ll. 53–54; 59–64]

Markedly, the mother’s dialogue humanizes her situation. Bloomfield accentuates her devotion to her innocent son and her emotional response to his illness through her “terror and dismay” and her “anxiety and pain” (ll. 53, 61). Though the rural population often felt the brunt of loss from smallpox epidemics, this was a universal fear which knew no boundaries of class. Historically, even royalty died of smallpox, such as Queen Mary II of England (1662–1694). During the eighteenth century, the disease reached most major European cities, accumulating estimated death tolls of “400,000 people each year and caus[ing] more than one-third of all the blindness in Europe” (Behbehani 458). Thus, Bloomfield’s depiction of one rural laborer transcends class barriers through his emphasis upon the empathetic nature of an anxious mother figure.

The poem’s setting of a pastoral landscape, complete with characters of rural laborers, transitions to a weaving between rural practices and scientific advancement. The poem’s speaker remarks at the divine blessing of a cure for this affliction:
Say, should Heav’n grant us, in some hallow’d hour,
Means to divest this demon of his power,
[…]
Would it not be a glorious day to see?
That day is come! […]

[ll. 67–68; 72–73]

Though the speaker thanks “Heav’n” for granting access to knowledge of vaccination, and claims to “Invoke no muse, no power below the skies” (l. 74), the description of obtaining this knowledge credits numerous sources. The speaker believes that “Nature” “Gave the farm-yard an honourable name” (l. 82) by hiding the secrets of smallpox vaccination within cows’ blood:

[…] then, who had seen
In herds that feast upon the vernal green,
Or dreamt that in the blood of kine there ran
Blessings beyond the sustenance of man?

[ll. 83–86]

The credit for this discovery lies not only in the “Blessings” of “Nature’s holy flame” (ll. 86, 81), but in the rural traditions which understood that milkmaids afflicted with cowpox became immune to smallpox. The speaker links this proximity with cowpox—close enough to smell the “fragrance of the heifer’s breath” (l. 90)—to knowledge of immunity “that lives in rustic song” (l. 92). In truth, Jenner’s discovery validated this link as more than “just a fantasy; it was based upon scientific observation, but it was also essentially a simple discovery which had lain dormant in local beliefs about cowpox: ‘plain truth tradition seem’d to know, / And simply pointed to the harmless Cow [ll. 109–110]’” (White 149–150). In essence, Bloomfield credits the traditional medicinal knowledge of the rural population as a precedent to this scientific discovery.

Though traditional knowledge-systems do not seek validation from scientific knowledge, the recognition of medicinal truth in England’s folklore opened a passage to different interpretations of societal progress. Bloomfield’s poem races with the tantalizing prospect of other keys to
knowledge hidden within nature and in the knowledge-systems of cultures close to nature:

Yes, we have conquer’d! and the thought should raise
A spirit in our prayers as well as praise,
For who will say, in Nature’s wide domain
There lurk not remedies for every pain?

[ll. 285–286]

These “remedies” (l. 286) are no longer limited to smallpox: the poem considers the future conquest of “plagues” and “fevers” ravishing England and the entirety of the Earth (ll. 288, 290). Though the remainder of the poem wanders through tangents on England’s glory and other imperialist notions, this theme of victory reemerges towards the poem’s end:

[…]—Victory shall increase
Th’incalculable wealth of private peace;
And such a victory, unstain’d with gore,
That strews its laurels at the cottage door,
Sprung from the farm, and from the yellow mead,
Should be the glory of the pastoral reed.

[ll. 369–374]

Again, a British Romantic pastoral poet invokes a meaning of “wealth” (l. 370) far removed from the classical Capitalist definition. Much like Wordsworth’s luxuries “of a life / Intent on little but substantial needs” (ll. 161–162), in Book VIII of *The Prelude*, the markers of progress within a society can stem from physical well-being of participants in that society rather than “the annual product of [a nation’s] labor” (Caradonna 47). In Wordsworth’s pastoral, this included the most basic form of survival and of transferring knowledge through generations. In Bloomfield’s poem, the goal of societal growth now includes a certain standard of health, a standard which offers the farmer and the shepherd a “private peace” (l. 370). This is a metric of modernization which British Romantic poets would not attempt to escape.
Thus, “Good Tidings” offers a glimpse into a potential societal model which British Romantic poets would constitute as a successful interpretation of modernization. In this rendition of societal progress, there is no need to construct poetic sanctuaries as a “refuge from modernity,” because this modernity does not create refugees (Philippon 397). This is not a fantastical, escapist, or regressive ideology; rather, this is the prototype for a more sustainable definition of development resurfacing in modern governments. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) redefined international development strategies in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as “a global blueprint for dignity, peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future” (“Sustainable Development Goals”). This overall target of sustainable global societies uses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as metrics of progress. In the 2018 Sustainable Development Goals Report, these goals included standards of societal progress radically dissimilar to industrial modernity’s placement of “technological advancement and economic liberalization at the center of their conception of progress” (Caradonna 57). Examples of the UN’s SDGs include “Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; [and] Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (Jensen 4–5). These lofty ideals reflect the value-system which British Romantic poets tried desperately to instill in their readers and which ecocritics misidentified as “escaping reality” through an “idealized image of nature” and society’s connection to nature (Bracke 435).

To conclude, pastoralism withstands a legacy of literary critique steeped in accusations of artifice and escapism. Modern ecocritical discourse continues this legacy through the claim that the pastoral “has been primarily understood by ecocritics and other scholars as representing an escapist, idealized image of nature” (Bracke 435). Specifically, these ecocritics pinpoint the British Romantic pastoral as promoting a fantastical representation of nature by “overlook[ing] the actuality of the landscape [in favor of] more ideal terrain [. . .]” (Phillips 234). Yet British Romantic poets did not craft images of nature from pure imagination: these pastoral poems arose from empirical evidence—from environmental disasters and from fruitful harvests, from personal tragedies and from scientific discoveries. These
writers did not merely praise simplistic rural landscapes in order to elude an inevitable industrialization. These authors represented their personal convictions and environmental morals which did not assume “that the key values of the Industrial Revolution [were] beyond reproach [. . .]” (Caradonna 57). Rather, British Romantic poets criticized industrial modernity by creating poetry which proposed rational arguments against “social inequality for the sake of private wealth; economic growth at the expense of everything, including the integrity of the environment; and the naïve assumption that mechanized newness is always a positive thing” (ibid). However, these poets also harmonized their skepticism towards needless invention with their strong emotional connection to the most vulnerable of society. In a dissection of Bloomfield’s representative pastoral poem, the poet still praises technological advancements which exist to promote the physical well-being of the rural class and all members within society. Overall, the British Romantic pastoral shows evidence of a value-system in which societies may progress without denigrating the validity of rural traditions or exploiting the capacity of natural resources. Ecocritics may keep alive Samuel Johnson’s harsh claim that pastoralism never “professed to imitate real life” (324); yet it seems that such scholars fail to consider the idea that the aspects of “real life” which they accuse British Romantics of attempting to escape, are not aspects worth imitating.
Works Cited


Bloomfield, Robert. *Good Tidings; or, News From The Farm: A Poem.* Parnassian Press, 1804.


Shiva, Vandana. *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and...*


Works Referenced


A discipline—whether scientific or literary—grows through a necessary tension between tradition and innovation (Kuhn 79). Nearly two centuries of ecological discovery and literary experience separate the British Romantic period from the present era; as such, ecocriticism proposes a reexamination of the Romantic pastoral sub-genre through the lens of modern environmental thought (Pinkney 411). In theory, this reevaluation should aim to critique antiquated tropes and to inform contemporary environmental writing. Yet, in practice, contemporary ecocritics often seem to caricature Romantic works as an impractical devotion to an idealized “Nature,” and as a futile attempt at escaping industrialized modernity. This reductionist representation of British Romantic pastoralism leaves the literary sub-genre seemingly easily dismissed; and this simplistic representation perpetuates a trend which considers all of Romantic pastoralism (indeed, pastoralism in general) to be inconsequential (Phillips 146) or, worse, to be detrimental to modern environmental aims (Garrard 63).
It should be noted that this thesis does not pretend to elucidate the nebulous definition of ecocriticism, nor the complex motivations which fuel the movement. Moreover, this thesis does not denigrate the necessity of a literary field devoted to the “relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xvii). Rather, as ecocriticism struggles to define what it is by defining what it is not, this thesis explored a facet of the current theory in order to contribute to a growing conversation. To accomplish this discussion, the Introduction posed a central quotation from ecocritical scholar Astrid Bracke: “More recently […] pastoral has become something of an ecocritical black sheep, best avoided altogether” (434). In Chapter One, this thesis strove to understand ecocriticism’s “avoid[ance]” of the Romantic pastoral through a reflection on ecocritical history. Through this historical and literary review, two major ecocritical critiques of the Romantic pastoral were identified and, subsequently, were addressed.

To begin, Chapter Two addressed ecocritics’ claim that the Romantic pastoral is outdated in an era which erases, or blurs, a distinction between “urban” and “nature.” This chapter rejected the assumption that this dichotomization existed solely to denigrate urbanization and to deify “Nature.” In fact, representations of Nature in British Romantic poetry demanded a balance between human and non-human entities (Webster)—a balance which some ecocritics mistakenly identify as over-emphasizing a pristine rural landscape. While pastoral poetry does emphasize a need for restricting and reimagining urban life—and often accentuates this point through juxtaposition of “urban” and “rural”—British Romantic writers promoted rural lifestyles because rural dwellers and laborers respected and practiced an equality between the human and the non-human. To argue against this pastoral legacy, simply because of its dependency on erecting comparisons, seems to be against much of ecocriticism’s founding ideology.

Next, Chapter Three addressed ecocritics’ claim that the Romantic pastoral relied on artificial representations of nature in order to escape the unpleasant aspects of modernization. The fault in this claim was two-fold. First, British Romantic poets crafted realistic images of rural landscapes and of the people closest to those landscapes: this included poetry
on the devastation of natural disasters and on the hardships of agricultural lifestyles. This is not to suggest that these writers did not often focus on the advantages of rural life; however, some ecocritics cherry-pick poems, or stanzas of poems, which emphasize only the advantages as evidence that the disadvantages were intentionally withheld or dismissed. Secondly, this claim implies that modernization is not a phenomenon to be escaped. Yet industrial modernity, and its devotion to the value-system of a classical Capitalist economy, is merely one interpretation of progress—an interpretation which British Romantic authors did not believe was “beyond reproach […]” (Caradonna 57).

In short, ecocriticism’s current rejection of Romantic pastoralism seems to be hasty. The two most prevalent arguments upon which this dismissal stands show evidence of over-simplification and of over-generalization. While a school of literary thought cannot, and should not, consider the entirety of a sub-genre as of equal value, neither should they exclude a whole literary era’s worth of works based on stereotyped trends. By invoking representative and diverse examples of British Romantic poetry, this thesis hopes to inspire ecocritical scholars to consider the nuances of these works, and to urge for a reconsideration of the ecological value within the pastoral legacy. As a field at the intersection of literature and the environment, ecocriticism may have a critical transdisciplinary role in the confrontation of impending climactic devastation. In this light, to exclude the experience and the caveats of environmental displacement and destruction within Romantic pastoralism would be foolish, if not fatal.


Webster, Suzanne. Personal Interview. 8 Feb. 2019.
About the Author

Marissa Kopp is a senior at Elizabethtown College dual majoring in Environmental Science and Professional Writing. She works as an In-Class Tutor of English at Harrisburg Area Community College and will attend the Pennsylvania State University for a Ph.D. in Ecology. Her interests lie in bridging the gap between ecosystem resilience and public awareness; and, she believes communication is the key to surviving the climate crisis.